

The Play's the Thing by MonsterSquad

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Max M., Mike W.

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-05-01 20:14:30

Updated: 2018-05-25 18:36:39

Packaged: 2019-12-16 23:18:22

Rating: M

Chapters: 10

Words: 38,221

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Despite what her theater professor father thinks, El Hopper changes her major to theater in her third year of college. When the theater department and broadcasting department team up to turn the play into a movie, El finds herself drawn to a particular film major who happens to have some mutual friends and who also happens to be shadowing her director father.

1. Change is Good

Jim Hopper threw his satchel on the table and headed toward the refrigerator. It had been a long day. A theater professor, he had been given the job of directing a new production that the head of the department, Joyce Byers, had written and after knowing the woman for quite some time, he knew she was a perfectionist when it came to her own work and he had a headache just from thinking about how she was going to find everything he did to be wrong. He was also in charge of casting, but he knew she would have the final say in the matter. He had just sat down in his favorite chair when the door flew open.

"Dad! Guess what! I'm now a theater major!" His daughter Jane (or El, as she preferred to be called) ran into the small den where he sat, jumping around giddily.

"You changed *again*? This is the third time. You're already a junior. And we've talked about this. I want you to be able to support yourself when school is finished. Do you really think this is a good idea?" Jim squeezed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "And I can't play favorites with you. You will have to do all the work. I can't cast you in productions just because you're my kid."

"I know. I don't want you to do me any favors. I want to do it myself." El said sincerely, the resolve evident on her face.

Jim sighed. "Well there's an audition for something Dr. Byers has written that I'm directing so you might as well start now. It's on Thursday at the Fogler auditorium. You need to memorize a monologue so you should get to work on that. Nothing silly. I think it's a drama. I haven't read it yet. She just appointed me today." He shook his head. Thinking of tiny Joyce demanding that he direct her play made him smile. She was so dramatic.

"I will get to work on that. I'm going to go to the bookstore to find something to memorize. I also want to tell Max and she should be working now."

The autumn leaves swirled as the wind blew lazily. El zipped up her

jacket and headed to the bookstore, which was a very cool place as it was also a record store. Her friend Max worked in the record store part. El was excited thinking about auditioning. She had never done it before and wanted to prove to herself that this wasn't a bad idea like her father thought. She resisted the urge to skip down the sidewalk but she felt exhilarated by the entire concept of becoming a theater major.

She could hear the sounds of Violent Femmes blasting even before she opened the door to the store. *Max is definitely working today.* El saw her fiery hair and stepped behind Max as she was alphabetizing the D section of records. She gently tugged on Max's long hair. Max spun around, an angry glare on her face melting away as soon as she saw who was standing behind her.

"Wow, you look happy. Why are you grinning like a loon, El?" Maxed joked, popping the gum she was chewing.

"I changed my major to theater and I'm here to find something to memorize. I have my first audition Thursday!"

"Hell yeah, El! That sounds right up your alley. Hey, Lucas! El is going to be a theater major!" Max yelled across the room to the tall dark skinned boy who was manning the register. "Isn't that cool?"

Lucas stuck his fist in the air like John Bender at the end of *The Breakfast Club.* "Very cool, El."

"I have to go find some monologues in the book section. I'll talk to you before I leave." El smiled again and moved toward the books.

The book section of the store was much quieter than the music section. There were big chairs where people could sit and read and shelves upon shelves of books, all categorized and alphabetized. It didn't make El's decision easier though. She had no idea where to start to look for any sort of monologues. She considered the titles and thumbed through a few selections. None of them seemed right. She noticed a guy sitting in one of the chairs reading what looked to be something by Kurt Vonnegut. He was obviously tall and had floppy black hair that he kept pushing back from his eyes as he looked down at his book. She noticed him glance at her a couple of times. El went

back to looking for something that she could commit to memory.

Exasperated, El was about to give up when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Do you need help finding something?" The guy from the chair asked.
"I don't work here but I come here a lot. I might be able to help."

El told him why she was at the store and what she was searching for. She felt a little embarrassed that she must have looked so lost that another customer stepped to her aid. He seemed nice though, in no way patronizing, and looked like he genuinely wanted to help.

And he's cute. He's very cute. Freckles.

"Do you go to school here?" He asked as they walked along the stacks.

"I do. My dad also teaches here. He's a theater professor. He's directing the play I'm auditioning for but he says he won't cast me unless I deserve it. I need to make a good impression. My name is El, by the way."

"I'm Mike. El is a nice name."

"It's actually Jane but I prefer El. I like nicknames."

They walked to another section of books. Mike took one off the shelf. "You might find something in here. I know lots of people do Shakespeare but I think it would be cool if you did a monologue that was given by a male character. You know, it might make it seem way deeper if a woman did it." Mike put the book in her hand. As he did, their fingers touched and El tried not to notice the tingle that went up her arm or the goosebumps that erupted even though she was wearing a jacket.

"Thanks, Mike. This looks promising." El looked up at him and smiled.

Mike grinned back. "I'm glad I could help. I hope you get the part. What is it they say? Break a leg?"

"Thanks. I'll certainly try. Thanks again for helping me. Maybe I'll see you around?"

"Yeah, maybe so." Mike smiled a lopsided grin at her and went back to his chair. El clutched the book to her chest and went back to talk to Max.

"...All I'm saying is that it's the perfect way to keep people out when you don't want them there." Lucas was saying as El walked back into the music section.

"It's kind of dumb though. We name the house? I don't want to live in a house with a stupid name." Max rolled her eyes at Lucas. El looked between the two of them like watching a tennis match.

"It won't be stupid. If we don't all agree we'll find some other name." Lucas quipped.

"What are you two talking about?" El asked confusedly.

"Lucas says that we should name our house and then when we have parties we just say the house name so only people who know us and know where we live will be able to find it." Max informed her.

"That actually sounds pretty genius to me." El stated. Lucas beamed at Max, an *I told you so* look on his face.

"We'll have to vote on it. We'll have a meeting tonight. Will Small Brandon be home?"

Max and Lucas lived in a house that had been split into four apartments. They had been dating for a while and it was cheaper for them both to live together. They shared the house with three other guys. There was "Big Brandon," a tall, lovable guy who was a few years older than everyone else. He was definitely an alcoholic but he was always nice, always went to work (though sometimes he still smelled of beer), and always there to listen to everyone else. There was another guy named Brandon whom they called "Small Brandon" as to not confuse the two. Their friend Dustin had the apartment on the first floor with the fireplace. Max and Lucas lived upstairs.

"I think we'll all be home tonight. I have some great names but I'm

going to keep them to myself until we're all together." Lucas stated with authority.

"Whatever, nerd." Max laughed at him. "Did you find something, El?"

"Yes. I didn't know what I was looking for but a guy who was reading offered to help." She grabbed Max's arm and pulled her aside so Lucas wouldn't hear. "He was so cute!" El's eyes twinkled as she told her friend what happened.

"You mean Mike? He's here all the time. He's one of Lucas' best friends actually. He's at our place every weekend playing D&D with Lucas and Dustin. Nice guy. Dorky, but nice." Max went back to her collating.

El walked to the register to pay for her book. "So, Lucas, tell me about Mike." She tried to seem quasi-interested but the corners of her mouth kept turning upwards no matter how she tried to fight it.

"He's a great guy. Loves science, reading, other nerdy stuff." Lucas laughed. "He's in his third year here. He wants to be a movie director."

A director? Maybe I'll have some classes with him.

"That's cool." She tried to sound nonchalant. "Okay, thanks for the help guys. I have to go memorize some Shakespeare now. Oh, be sure to let me know what you name your house!"

"It will be awesome, I can promise you that." Lucas huffed his chest. Max's eyes rolled so hard El could almost hear it.

When El got back home she went to her room and started looking through the book Mike had suggested. *I should have asked him which one he thought I should do.* El decided to go ask her dad. He could always lend his knowledge and expertise.

"I can't decide which of these I should do, dad." El set the book on the coffee table. "There are so many. I want it to be good. Someone said I should do a male character's speech since I'm a woman. They thought it would be an interesting touch."

Hopper rubbed his chin as he picked up the book. "Try something from Hamlet or Macbeth. They're recognizable enough and you can show a wide range of emotions. I'd start there and see if you can find something." He handed her the book. El retreated to her bedroom to look through the two plays.

Thursday came quickly and El was nervous as she stood in the line that was starting to snake its way around the building. Apparently word had gotten out about Dr. Byers' play and more people were interested in it than she had thought. Hopper was surprised himself as he and Joyce sat in the darkened theater listening to the auditions. They would call back the ones they thought were good enough and Joyce had a scene from the play picked out that she would have the most promising read. So far they had a very short list to call back.

When it was El's turn she walked to the center of the stage.

"State your name and what you will be sharing with us." Jim called down to her.

Softly she said, "Jane Hopper."

"I can't hear you, kid. You're going to have to speak up. The people in the back have to be able to hear you as well." Hopper wasn't going to go easy on her.

With clarity and determination, "Jane Hopper. Please call me El."

"And what are you doing for us today, Jane Hopper Please Call Me El?"

Joyce stifled a laugh.

"It's from Macbeth. Act 5, scene 5."

"Whenever you're ready, El." Jim inwardly wished her the best.

El took a deep breath. Her face seemed to drop like she had become saddened.

*"She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.*

*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."*

All of her emotion was poured into the soliloquy. She had added inflection to certain words, making it sound like she was actually using her own speech, like a modern day young woman was saying it but without changing any of the dialogue. She didn't think she could have done it any better but she was still unsure of what her father and Dr. Byers thought of it. She bowed and exited the stage.

Jim and Joyce looked at each other. Joyce wrote El's name at the top of the short list. Jim was surprised at how effortless El seemed when performing. Maybe he had been wrong about it being a bad idea. She looked so natural up there.

El called Max from the auditorium. She had to talk to someone and her dad had more people to listen to and Max was her best friend. "I just finished my audition." El stated into the phone.

"How did you do? When will you know if you got it?" Max asked in reply.

"I think I did well, I'm not sure when I'll know. I hope my dad has some news when he comes home tonight. I felt like I was going to throw up but once I started everything felt more normal. It was fun! I'm still nervous though because now I know I want this really badly. I just don't know what they thought. I could barely see them because of the lights and I definitely couldn't see their faces."

"I'm sure you did well. What did you do for them?"

El told Max what she had just performed. El could hear other people at Max's house.

"Ha! You owe him \$5, Lucas! He called it!" Max said to someone in the room. El wondered who Lucas owed money to and for what.

"What did Lucas do?" El asked of her friend.

"Oh, Mike's here and he was saying that you were having your audition today and that he figured you'd do something from Macbeth. Lucas said it would be A Midsummer Night's Dream. Lucas lost."

Mike is talking about me and remembered when my audition was?

"Oh, that's cool." El was nonplussed. "Um, I'll let you know when I know something. Tell Mike I said hey. Oh, and Lucas too!" *Real smooth, El.*

That night when Hopper got home El was waiting for him in his den. He had a poker face as he asked her what he already knew.

"Do you need something? Why are you in my den? Can I help you?" Hopper teased.

"Did I get it?"

"Get what?" Hopper was enjoying this.

"Dad! Come on! Did I get the part?"

Hopper broke into a grin. "You got a callback. I have to call the others. Tomorrow you'll read a scene from the actual play and we'll decide if you get a part. You'll have to read with someone else who is up for a part. It will probably be a boy, just so you know. I've read the scene."

"Is it good?" El asked.

"Objectively, the play is very good. I'm not sure I'm thrilled about my daughter perhaps having the lead role. It's not exactly a play for little kids." Hopper sighed audibly.

El squealed. "I'm so excited! Did you think I was good?"

"I thought you were great! I was surprised. How you made it your

own was inspired. I was so proud of you."

El smiled and looked at her feet, her dimpled face making her look younger when she was this happy.

"Oh, there's another development that I was just informed of as we were finishing auditions today. Apparently it's not going to be a play. The broadcasting department is teaming up with the theater department and we're shooting this on film. It will be a movie. Joyce has been trying to get them to do it for years and I guess she finally beat them down enough. So I'll have to work with camera guys and other film people. That will be weird since I'm so used to stage productions. Joyce wants me to direct though so I'll have to learn quickly.

"A movie? That's awesome!" El couldn't believe her luck.

"Yeah so we're going to cast this and then I'll start working with some film people next week. The actors will have to learn their lines and work together on their own as well as in rehearsal. We can't spend tons of money on film so we have to make our takes count. I'm going to have a film student shadow me to help me out with things I might not know. I haven't met him yet but I know his name is Wheeler. I don't remember his first name though. We'll get started next week. If you get the part there will be a meeting for cast and crew where everyone can meet and receive their scripts."

El was reeling from excitement. It was all becoming so real. She couldn't wait to read the scene the next day. She was going to try harder than she'd ever tried for anything.

Max and Lucas were sitting at their table waiting on Dustin to finish showering and join them for their discussion of what to name the house. Both Brandons were already there. They had postponed their meeting and were finally all together to make a decision. Lucas had a list in front of him that he would hide with his arm whenever anyone tried to read it. Finally Dustin emerged in his bathrobe and slippers and they could start the meeting.

"Did everyone think of some name possibilities?" Lucas asked, clearly spearheading the discussion.

"I don't care what we call it." Big Brandon spoke.

"Yeah, I don't either. It's a cool idea but the name isn't important to me." Small Brandon added.

"Guys, it has to be a cool name!" Dustin spoke up. "I like Gilead, like from the Dark Tower books." He smiled with satisfaction.

"That's cool but people will mispronounce it." Lucas said.

"People are stupid." Dustin replied.

"It should be something magical and powerful." Max chimed in, causing Lucas to smile at her finally getting on board with his idea.

"Mordor?" Small Brandon threw out.

Everyone shook their heads. They wanted something more recognizable.

"Here's what I have on my list." Lucas read aloud. "Bespin, Mos Eisley, Hoth, Tatooine, Endor." Max made a gagging gesture with her finger in her mouth.

"No, no, no, no, and no. I don't want to live in Star Wars."

"I like them." Dustin offered Lucas an empathetic smile.

Suddenly a name popped into Max's head and she knew it was the perfect choice. She smiled radiantly and told them, all of the boys immediately thinking it was perfect. Even Lucas couldn't say no to the name. It was everything they were looking for and sounded cool too.

"We have to have a party this weekend to try it out!" Dustin shouted, giving Lucas a high five.

El showed up early to her callback. She was given the scene and read over it. She'd be allowed to read the script while doing it but she wanted to try to memorize it if she could, trying to show how much she wanted the part. She was paired with a sandy haired boy whom she felt absolutely no chemistry with but she pressed on and did her

lines. She hoped he didn't get the part because she knew her character would have to kiss him at some point.

You're getting ahead of yourself, El. It's not your character yet.

El did the scene with no problems, even though she didn't like the looks of the guy at all. She had memorized all of her lines and delivered them expertly. Hopper had looked on as he and Joyce watched the pair interact. He could tell that Joyce was impressed with El. After they were finished Joyce told them to excuse themselves from the room and she turned to Hopper.

"I want her. She's my Flora. I don't need to see any more girls for that part. She is excellent, Hop. Why hasn't she been doing this for years?"

"She's really good, isn't she? I can't believe it myself. She will be ecstatic that she got the part. I can't wait to tell her." Jim smiled thinking about how happy El would be. "I think we should keep trying for the boy though. I don't think that guy is what we want."

"You're right. We still need a Miles. We have a few more guys coming in today. Hopefully our Miles is in that group." Joyce pensively mused.

They did not find their Miles amongst the remaining boys who had been called back.. Joyce wanted it to be perfect and the boys were all missing some spark she was looking for. She would have to keep looking.

This time when Hopper got home he didn't mess with El's emotions. He got right to it.

"Well?" El asked, bouncing from one foot to the other.

"You got it. You are Flora."

El squealed in delight. She threw her arms around Hopper's neck and hugged him tightly. "Thank you so much, dad." Tears of joy filled her eyes.

"Don't thank me. You earned it yourself. You were amazing today. Joyce was very impressed and didn't want to hear anyone else read

for the part. You were so good!"

"I have to call Max and tell her. I'm an actress!" El ran down the hallway to her bedroom to phone her best friend.

Max answered on the second ring. El could hear her talking to people before she got the receiver to her ear to speak.

"Hello?"

"I got the part! Max, I'm in the play! Well, now it's a movie so I'm going to be in a movie!" El proceeded to tell Max about how the play had been changed and what that would entail.

"That's so awesome! I'm so happy for you! Hang on a second, these guys are being too loud."

El could hear as Max scolded the guys. *Shhh, I'm on the phone! Yes, she got the part. It's going to be a movie now. What? Why didn't you say something?*

El once again wondered who Max was talking to. She could only make out what Max was saying as the others were too far away from the phone.

"Hey, sorry about that. These guys are annoying. Mike says he knew it was going to be a movie. He said he was going to be helping. Isn't that weird?"

Mike is there again? He'll be helping out?

"Ask him how he's going to be helping." El said, adrenaline still pumping through her. She could tell Max had taken the phone away from her mouth again and heard her yell.

"Hey, Wheeler! How are you helping out on this movie?"

Wheeler?

Max came back to the line. "He's helping the director. He's your dad's shadow! Hey, we have to celebrate. We're having a party tomorrow night and you have to come. It will be so fun! We named our house

and we're trying it out but you really do have something to celebrate. Will you be here?"

"Sure! That would be great! Who else will be there?" El asked, trying to sound casual.

"All of us, Mike, Will Byers, anyone else who knows where we live. We've been spreading the word today. It's going to be great! El, consider this your invitation to Mount Olympus. That's what we named the house."

"That name is the best! I will be there!" El could hear the boys yelling "party at Olympus!"

Party at Olympus. And Mike will be there. Cool.

I have other chapters planned out but not written totally. I had to give a little backstory and this will burn slower than my previous work but I'm hoping it will be worth it in the end. Let me know what you think and thanks for reading!

2. Party at Olympus

Mike stood by the wall, people dancing around him, and could hear shouts coming from the kitchen in Dustin's apartment where a rousing game of beer pong was being played. He sipped from a red solo cup and was taking in the atmosphere when he saw her. Dancing with abandon in the center of the common room was El. She was wearing a white dress that stopped just above her knees and a denim jacket. She had brushed some of the curls out of her hair so it looked more wavy and he could see it bouncing as she swayed and bopped to the music. He was entranced.

Lucas was happy with the turnout of the party. He had so far not seen anyone he wouldn't want to be there so he guessed his plan of naming the house instead of giving out an address had been successful. He found Max, wanting to talk about how well their idea was turning out. She was watching something intently.

"What are you doing?"

"Watching your friend watch my friend." Lucas followed her gaze to see Mike staring at El, oblivious to anyone seeing the look of admiration on his face.

"How long has he been staring at her?" Lucas asked.

"Long enough to be embarrassed when he sees me looking at him." She waved her hand frantically, causing Mike to see her. The awkward look on his face told her he knew he had been caught staring. Mike sauntered over to where they were standing, trying to look as normal and casual as possible.

"Would you get me another drink, Stalker?" Max asked sweetly. Lucas was about to get himself something anyway so he disappeared into one of the downstairs apartment kitchens as both had been set up to serve the guests.

"Having fun, Mike? Seeing anything interesting?"

"Um, I know you saw me staring. I can explain." Mike looked at the

ground sheepishly.

"She is cute." Max started. "She's always bubbly and she's funny too."

"Yeah, and she makes the best facial expressions! She's all over the place and they're all adorable." The floodgates had been opened and Mike continued gushing. "And she has the best smile. You can't even see anyone else when she smiles. She just gives off an energy, you know? I mean, she's wearing Chuck Taylors with that dress and is making them look amazing!" Mike looked again at El as he was telling Max her attributes.

"It almost sounds like you like her. Like, *like* like her." Max snickered.

Mike's head whipped back to look at Max standing beside him. "No, it's not like that."

"It's not middle school, dude. If you like her go talk to her. I won't say anything to the guys. For once I'll give you a break." She smiled and gestured with her hand for him to shoo away.

Mike finished his drink and started toward where El was still dancing. He wasn't the best dancer so he tried to not look too foolish. She was mid-twirl when she saw him standing next to her.

"Mike! You're here!" El grabbed his hands and tried to get him to dance with her.

"I'm here. I was going to ask if you wanted a drink. I was about to get one for myself."

They walked out of the area where El had been dancing so that they could both hear each other better. The kitchen had a keg of beer in the floor and assorted liquor bottles sitting on the counter.

"I don't really like beer." El said.

"Do you still want something? You don't have to but I could make you a drink that tastes better. If you want." Mike offered.

"If you promise it won't taste like beer or anything disgusting." El nodded her head and smiled at Mike. He opened the refrigerator to

see what kinds of juices he could work with. He settled on cranberry and went about making her a vodka cranberry. He didn't go too heavy on the alcohol, noting that she was so small and didn't drink much. He held his breath as she took a sip, wanting to impress her with his bartending skills.

"Mmm, this is good, Mike. It's sweet." *Like you.* El finished in her mind.

They walked outside to the back porch where some people were arguing over which comics were better, DC or Marvel. El and Mike walked out into the yard where it was quiet and they could actually talk in normal voices. The night was cool and El was glad she had her jacket. Her dress had spaghetti straps but she liked the way it looked so she had worn it even though it might not be best suited for fall. They sat on a bench that was near the back edge of the yard and sipped their drinks for a few moments. The night was so clear that when they looked up they could see the stars.

"So why do you call yourself El if your name is Jane?" Mike turned to face her.

"It's kind of a weird story. Are you sure you want to hear it?" El asked him, surprised that he seemed interested in something she thought was so mundane.

"Definitely."

"Well I am actually adopted. My dad adopted me when I was 6 and I was very shy and quiet. He tried everything to get me to come out of my shell. One of his favorite movies is *This is Spinal Tap*. He would try to do Nigel Tufnel's British accent and tickle both of my ears as he said *these go to eleven* and it would always make me laugh so he started doing it all of the time and then it became him just calling me Eleven and as I got older I still liked it better than Jane so I shortened it so I wouldn't have to tell the story all the time. He still calls me Eleven sometimes." El smiled at the memory.

"That's kind of an awesome story. Thanks for letting me know. You dad seems nice. I guess I'll be working with him soon."

"He can come off gruff and grumpy but he's really a big softy. I think you two will get along fine. I'm excited to get started." El polished off the last of her drink. "Would you mind making me another one of these? I thought it was good." El looked at Mike, her eyes forcing him to want to do whatever she bid.

"Let's go do that. It's getting cold out here anyway." Mike stood up and offered her his hand to pull her up from the bench. She took it and noticed once again how it felt like tingles running up her arm. His hands were warm even though he had been holding a cold drink and they were outside in early November.

Back in the kitchen of Dustin's apartment Mike was making El's second drink. Dustin was standing at his counter with his head thrown back trying to balance a red cup on his chin.

"Are you having fun, El?" Dustin asked after giving up his cup balancing endeavor.

"Yes. I think you could say it's been a good week. And Mike is making me a drink that tastes good. He promised it wouldn't be repulsive." El was starting to feel the effects of her first drink and a warm wave of calm happiness was surging through her body.

"Mike never breaks promises." Dustin grinned, looking at El before he looked back to Mike. "If you are his friend he will do anything for you."

El looked at Mike. "We're friends, right Mike?" He was passing her the drink he'd made for her.

"Of course we are."

"Promise?" El's gaze never left his eyes as she took a drink.

"I promise, El."

El finished her second drink pretty quickly. She could hear one of her favorite songs playing and wanted to dance. Feeling free, she pulled Mike onto the makeshift dance floor with her. He felt awkward but tried his best to keep time with the beat. El either didn't notice his missteps or she didn't care. The next song was slower, not something

that could be thought of as a slow dancing song, but in El's more tipsy state she pulled Mike closer to her and put her arms around his neck.

"Dance with me, Mike?" El was already laying her head on his shoulder. Or, close to his shoulder since he was so much taller than her. He obliged, thinking that it wasn't going to hurt anything and that he looked better slow dancing than trying to actually dance. She also felt pretty wonderful in his arms but he wasn't going to dwell on that. When the song was over Mike saw Will Byers and he and El crossed the room to welcome him to the party. He had been working on an art project so was late getting there. El and Will knew each other from their parents both teaching at their school. Mike couldn't believe the first time he'd run into El was just a few days before when all of their friends seemed to know each other and actively hung out together.

"Mike's making drinks!" El giggled to Will.

"Really? Will he make one for me?" Will asked El, as though Mike wasn't standing right there.

"He will! And he'll make one for me. And we'll all have drinks!" El was starting to slur.

"I don't know if you need another one, El. You seem pretty good right now." Mike looked at her, his brow furrowing and his mouth set to worry.

El pouted. "But Will just got here. I want to have a drink with Will. And you, Mike. Please make them?" El was looking at him with those eyes again and he couldn't say no.

"This will be your last one. Okay? I'll make them because you asked nicely." Will looked at Mike, an eyebrow raised as if to say *whipped much?* Mike pulled El back into the kitchen where he made them all drinks. He noticed they were almost out of vodka just as Max entered the kitchen.

"Vodka is almost out." Mike told her.

"We have more in our apartment. Would you run up there and get it? It's in the pantry in the kitchen in a bag on the floor." Max instructed.

Mike started to go for the stairs but a hand caught him. "I want to go with you. Take me." El was laughing and hanging onto his side. He nodded and they started to go upstairs. Mike had to help her twice as she stumbled up the one flight.

"You are definitely cut off." Mike laughed.

El was still laughing as they entered Max and Lucas' apartment. Mike started to go to the pantry to get the vodka and she stopped him and hugged him. He knew she was drunk so he hugged her back, tucking her head under his chin as they stood in the hallway of the apartment locked in their embrace.

"You're so nice. I think you're the nicest." El was saying, her voice muffled by his shirt. Mike knew he shouldn't have made her the third drink.

"You're nice too, El." Mike rubbed her back, her arms squeezing his torso tighter.

"No, you don't get it." El sounded like she was going to cry now.

"It's okay, El. Don't cry. You just had a lot to drink."

"You smell good too. You're so smart. I wouldn't be Flora if not for you. You're the best." Mike could feel her pressing her face harder against him.

"Mike?" El looked up at him.

"What is it, El?"

Suddenly she got a strange look on her face. "Oh, no!" She turned and looked around frantically. Mike could tell what was happening. He guided her quickly into the bedroom where the bathroom was. He threw the seat of the toilet up just in time for El to fall to her knees and heave the contents of her stomach into the bowl. Mike immediately reached down and held her hair back, not caring if he was going to see more than he wanted to see. When she was finished

she sat back on the floor against the side of the tub.

"I don't feel good." El looked up at Mike helplessly.

"I will be right back. I'm going to go ask Max something and then I'm coming right back. Do you feel like you need to throw up again?" Mike crouched down beside her.

"Not right now. Just hurry."

"I will. I promise. I just need to ask her if I can put you in their bed." He ran out of the room and dashed down the stairs, thankfully quickly finding Max at the foot of them.

"Max, she's too drunk. She just threw up and she looks terrible." Max could see the frantic worry in his face.

"Put her in our bed. We can crash with Dustin. Are you going to look after her?"

"I'm on my way back up. I will take care of her." Mike sprinted back up the stairs.

El was still sitting on the floor against the tub when Mike got back to the room.

"Let's get you to the bed. Can you stand up?" Mike saw the look on her face and started to lift her up by himself.

"Be careful, the room is spinning. I taste gross." El said as he hoisted her from the floor. Mike sat her down on the toilet seat and grabbed a cup from the side of the sink. He filled it with water, had her rinse her mouth out and spit in the tub which was closer to her than the sink, and then he gave her mouthwash to take away the bad taste. He carried her to the bed, putting her on the end of it as he pulled the covers back before helping her move up.

"What are you doing?" She asked as she tried to put her legs under the blankets and he stopped her.

"I'm taking your shoes off. You will sleep better. Let's take off your jacket too." He removed her jacket and hung it on the closet

doorknob. Making quick work of her shoes, he set them on the floor before he pushed her legs under the bedding and tucked her in.

He planned on sitting in a chair next to the bed until El said he should lie next to her in case she had to get up again. He made himself comfortable on top of the bedding. After a few minutes, El made a whiny noise.

"What's wrong? Do you need to throw up again?" Mike was ready to jump up and help her to the bathroom.

"Too tight. I can't breathe. You're on top of the blanket."

Mike could see how that might make her feel smothered or claustrophobic. He crawled underneath the blankets but kept a healthy distance, wanting to be gentlemanly.

"Better?" He asked.

"Much. My head hurts."

Mike turned on his side to face her. He reached out toward her head and as his hands were moving closer El thought *is he going to kiss me?* But then his thumbs went to either of her temples while his fingers wrapped around the back of her head. He was rubbing small circles on her temples as his fingers massaged her scalp. El closed her eyes, immediately feeling some of the pressure of her headache start to fade. Mike was still massaging her head when he saw her face go slack and could hear her breathing steady, signaling that she was asleep. He fell asleep carding his left hand through her hair, feeling the softness on his fingertips and watching her sleep.

The next morning Mike awoke to find El's head resting comfortably on his chest. She had moved in the night and was now planted firmly against his side, using him for a pillow. He looked at her, how peaceful and beautiful she looked when she slept. She started to stir and he closed his eyes, pretending that he was still asleep. When he could tell she was awake he opened his eyes.

"How are you feeling?"

"What am I doing here? What happened? I can't remember anything

after talking to Will." El sat up, realizing that she was lying almost on top of Mike.

"Shit. I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm on top of you. And why is it so bright in here?" Her eyes squinted and she covered her face with her hands. Mike looked to the bedside table and noticed a pair of aviator sunglasses. *This must be Lucas' side of the bed.* He handed them to El.

"Here, see if these help." She put them on and smiled weakly at him.

"What happened last night?" El asked, her eyes pleading for a truthful answer.

"You had one too many drinks. It's my fault. I shouldn't have made you the third one. You were having the best time. We came up here to get another bottle of vodka and you started to feel sick and barely made it to the bathroom to throw up."

"Ugh, I threw up? She looked instinctively at the ends of her hair, inspecting it for any mess.

"I held your hair. You were very clean about it. You looked pitiful so I put you in their bed and you went to sleep."

"I remember hands in my hair? Maybe?"

"You had a headache so I was trying to help relieve that. I hope it was okay." Mike nervously explained.

"It must have been if I wound up sleeping on you." El smiled a half smile at him. His heart swelled at the sight. "I'm sorry about that. I should respect personal spaces."

"It was fine, El. I really don't mind."

"I want to go home and lie in my bed until tomorrow." El rubbed her temples.

"I'll take you. Come on."

They made their way down the stairs, Mike carrying her piggyback style. She rested her head on his back, her arms thrown around his

neck and his arms holding her legs. There were a few people still sleeping on the floor and on the couch of the common room. Mike put El in the passenger seat of his car, buckled her in, and started the drive to her house. He was glad he knew the area well because within a couple of minutes El was asleep with her head against the side window. He pulled into the driveway of her house, having gotten the address from her before they got in the car. He carried the still groggy El to the front door and rang the bell.

Jim opened the door to see a lanky young man with dark eyes and dark fluffy hair standing on his porch holding his daughter bridal style.

"Um, Professor Hopper? I'm Mike Wheeler. I'm going to be your shadow for Dr. Byers' screenplay? I, uh, she's not feeling very well. She drank a little too much last night...which is totally my fault because I made the drinks and I should have cut her off...but she has a look about her? Something that I couldn't say no to? Anyway, I'm sorry and she's okay she just needs to sleep and she has a headache." Mike rambled to the man staring him down.

"End of the hall, last room on the right. Put her on her bed."

Mike carefully slid through the door, making sure not to bump her head, and did as he was told. He laid her on her bed and pulled a blanket over her. He ran his fingers through her hair one more time.

"I'll see you tomorrow, El. Get some rest." He murmured softly before quietly closing her door and returning to the front of the house where Jim Hopper was waiting, looking sternly at him as he reappeared from the hallway.

"I promise, sir, nothing happened." Mike kept his voice down but was ready to defend himself, knowing how it must look to El's father.

"Save it, kid. She can take care of herself. Have a seat. Tell me about yourself since we're going to be working together."

Mike told him about his desire to be a film director and what classes he had already taken. Jim noticed that El's name was peppered into the conversation, Mike not seeming to notice how he kept going back

to her.

"I guess we start tomorrow then." Jim mused. "I've known Joyce Byers for years. Once she knows what she wants to do she does it. I know another woman like that." Hopper nodded towards the hallway. Mike turned a pale shade of red. "I'm looking forward to learning some of your movie stuff, Mike."

Mike nodded, thinking they could definitely learn from each other.

I'll try to have another chapter by Friday. Now they have to get started with the show and they still haven't seemed to be able to find the leading man. Hmmmm...

3. Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Since the fall break was approaching quickly, the cast and crew tried to meet a few times the first week to organize the production. They still had yet to cast the part of Miles, the leading male character. Joyce Byers was hard set on getting someone who fit the idea of the character that she had formed in her head. Everyone learned that the play, or screenplay as it now was, was about a couple of friends who had feelings for each other but were both too stubborn to admit it. The entire cast was small, with the roles of Miles and Flora being the biggest ones and a few other minor characters that functioned as friends of the protagonists. Dr. Byers knew that, especially on a college campus, lots of people would be able to relate to the story. It would not be a full length movie. Being the first time the school had attempted a collaboration between the two departments they had not allotted a huge budget and the timeline was relatively short.

Mike had shown Hopper the monitors and how to watch the action through them so he could see what would be seen on the film. The cameramen were students who were among the best in their field so Hopper knew it was up to him to not mess up. Everyone seemed to know what they were doing.

As Mike was discussing different camera cues with Hopper, he heard the voice of Dr. Byers calling out loudly.

"We still have not cast our leading man. I am planning on having yet another audition this week but we need to get started working on reading through the script. I need someone to stand in for the character." She searched the faces in the small crowd of people. She zeroed in on Mike as he quietly chatted with Hopper.

"You do it." She called to him.

"Me?" He asked, looking around to see if maybe she was speaking to someone else.

"Yes, you. You're my son's friend, correct? I've seen you at my house."

"I'm not an actor though." Mike looked around at the faces watching

the conversation.

"I asked you to read, not act." She was getting huffy. "Can you read?"

"I can read." Mike glared at Dustin who was standing in the back of the room. He had heard his tell-tale laugh.

"Then please come up here and let's read the script. I'm sure El would like to get started." Dr. Byers' mention of El seemed to get the boy's legs moving toward the front of the studio.

When they had finished the run through, Dr. Byers stepped in front of Mike and El and announced that he would play the role of Miles. Mike was flabbergasted.

"But I'm not an actor!" He claimed once again.

"You have the look I want, you have the voice I want, and was that the first time you have read this script?" She asked him.

"Yes, it was."

"Well you were perfect. I want you for this character. I can't make you do it but I've seen a lot of people come and go in the theater business and you have great potential."

Mike looked at El, who was biting her lip and looking at him like a puppy who wants you to take it home with you. "Please, Mike?" She asked him, the hopefulness showing on her face.

Mike sighed and agreed to play the role of Miles.

The weeks leading up to the Thanksgiving break went quickly. They filmed scenes out of chronological order for concern of time and difficulty. Dustin was the editor and would be spending the weeks leading to the Christmas break cutting the footage together so they wanted to get him as much to work with as possible. They had the short time before the students left for the fall break to film as much as they could and they would save a few key scenes to shoot right after everyone came back.

The night before everyone would leave for Thanksgiving they all met

at Mike's apartment to hang out before the break. Max and Lucas showed up first with Dustin in tow. Will called and said he was on his way, asked if he needed to bring anything (he didn't). El got to Mike's last. They were all having a few drinks when she got there.

"None for me, thanks." She said, laughing as she entered Mike's living room where everyone was sitting around listening to music.

"El!" Mike ran to her and gave her a bear hug. He was clearly already on his way to sloppy drunk. She wondered what had gotten into him to make him get like that.

"I'm here. Are you okay?" She asked him. He grinned like an idiot and said, "I am now." His forwardness was concerning. Will noticed her worried look.

"Hey, El? Wanna help me with something in the kitchen?" Will motioned his head toward the other room and she followed him.

"What is wrong with Mike? He doesn't normally get like this does he?" She anxiously asked.

"He hates going home. He's not looking forward to it. That's why he had all of us over tonight. His parents fight a lot, well, his dad yells at his mom and Mike when he's there, and it makes him feel like shit. It's just a week but to him it will seem like a month when he's home. His dad is one of those guys who is a decent father, meaning that they have a house and food and things, but he's a terrible dad. He never did anything with Mike. Mike doesn't even think his dad ever loved him." Will shook his head.

"That's awful! He's the sweetest person ever. I don't want to think of him being in pain."

"He usually hides it well. It's just that he has to go tomorrow and he gets sad thinking about it. That's why he's already so drunk." Will motioned back to the living room.

El had heard enough. She walked back into the room where the others were. She walked up to Mike and hugged him. "I'm glad you had us over tonight, Mike."

He looked surprised that she was hugging him but it quickly melted into a grin and he held her tightly. They were listening to a mix that Will had made a while back and the song changed as they stood there in each other's arms. A familiar melody started.

"Ooh, I love this song!" Mike started to sing along with When In Rome. He grabbed El's hands and they danced around, his eyes never leaving hers as he belted the tune at the top of his lungs.

*If you need a friend
Don't look to a stranger
You know in the end, I'll always be there
But when you're in doubt
And when you're in danger
Take a look all around, and I'll be there
I'm sorry, but I'm just thinking of the right words to say
I know they don't sound the way I planned them to be
But if you wait around a while, I'll make you fall for me
I promise, I promise you I will
When your day is through
And so is your temper
You know what to do
I'm gonna always be there
Sometimes if I shout
It's not what's intended
These words just come out
With no gripe to bear
I'm sorry, but I'm just thinking of the right words to say
I know they don't sound the way I planned them to be
But if you wait around a while, I'll make you fall for me
I promise you, I promise you I will
I'm sorry, but I'm just thinking of the right words to say
I know they don't sound the way I planned them to be
And if I had to walk the world, I'd make you fall for me
I promise you, I promise
I'm sorry, but I'm just thinking of the right words to say
I know they don't sound the way I planned them to be
And if I had to walk the world, I'd make you fall for me
I promise you, I promise you I will*

El felt as though he was singing it for her, *to* her. It felt very special. She knew she was going to miss him the next week. She hadn't told him that she was starting to fall for him but she definitely was. She watched as he fell back onto the sofa when the song was over and passed out. She felt a pang of heartache for him. He didn't deserve to feel so much dread about going to his own home. She covered him with a blanket. The guys had gone into the kitchen so it was just El and Max and a passed out Mike on the sofa. El bent down and kissed his forehead.

"It's not fair, Max." El said to the redhead.

"I know. He'd do anything for anyone."

"I wish he could stay here with me and my dad for Thanksgiving." El thought aloud.

"That would be great. His dad would get super mad though and then he'd have to deal with that wrath. It's easier for him to just go and get it over with. Like ripping off a Band-Aid." Max shrugged her shoulders. Her home life had not been the best so she was more used to yelling and the emotional destruction that went along with that.

Before everyone left that night, El wrote a note for Mike and slipped it into the pocket of the coat she thought he'd take with him.

The break went by quickly, as breaks tend to go, but for El waiting and wondering how Mike was doing was stressful. Finally everyone came back. El was happy to see Mike at rehearsal on that first Monday back but he seemed distant. He did everything that was asked of him, he performed well in the scenes they shot and paid attention to the notes he was given by Hopper. He still seemed despondent when the cameras weren't rolling or they weren't doing dialogue. They had a big scene to film at the end of the week and it would need all angles so Hopper was stressed out about it being just right. Mike and El would need to deliver near perfect performances so they could get it right the first time.

At Hopper's insistence, El and Mike were to use his office to work out any kinks in the upcoming scene. It would need to be shot from different angles and they did not have the film to waste, nor extra

money in the budget for more film, so the duo needed to get their timing and their moves flawless so it went smoothly when they filmed it the next day. Mike was still in a foul mood from Thanksgiving and had barely spoken to El outside of rehearsal. Hopper had lectures for the next three hours so they had the place to themselves to work. His office was small but filled with books. One end of the sofa had books tossed haphazardly onto it and his desk was piled with papers. There was a small window but it did not allow much outside light in, depending on the time of day. It was late afternoon so El had to turn on a lamp so it wouldn't be too dark in the room. A soft glow filled the small space.

Mike was quiet as El moved the books off of the couch in the office so they would have room. In the scene Flora was supposed to have had a nightmare while she was napping on the sofa. Miles was supposed to comfort her. El and Mike sat down to look over the script.

"Do you want to do the whole thing? I understand if you don't." Mike stated flatly as they looked over the notes.

"What do you mean? Obviously we need to practice the entire scene."

Mike sighed. "You know it ends in a kiss, right? If you don't want to do that part we don't have to. We can just wing it when we shoot it." Mike shrugged his shoulders. He wanted to do the whole scene but after spending the break at his parents' house and dealing with their constant bickering he was afraid of getting too close to El.

"I want to do the whole thing." El stated with finality. Mike looked at his feet.

"What is wrong, Mike? You seem like a different person since you came back from home. You haven't talked to me much."

"I just had a shitty Thanksgiving. My dad...ugh. I don't want to talk about it. Let's just practice this. I'd kind of like to be someone else for a little while." His eyes looked into hers and she could see his pain.

"I'm sorry. If I can do anything will you please let me know?" El asked, her concern showing on her face.

"You're here. That's enough. Let's try to work on this thing." Mike waved the script slightly.

They were supposed to be sitting on the sofa, her having fallen asleep and then having the nightmare. She would wake up disoriented and shaken and Miles was supposed to put his arm around her and hug her slightly. When he did this she was supposed to fall into him, throwing her leg over his lap so she could sit straddling him with her head on his chest and he could hold her with both arms. He had a few lines of dialogue where he comforted her as she cried against him and then he was supposed to tilt her head up and kiss her. The scene would cut with the kiss.

They tried sitting right next to one another but when El moved her leg over him like the directions indicated they bumped into each other and her leg didn't have enough room on the opposite side of him. Mike scooted over a bit so that there would be room for her leg when she straddled him. Upon the second try he hugged her with one arm and as he did she rolled into him and everything went much more smoothly. They practiced the maneuver a few times and finally thought it was seamless enough that they could start adding their lines to the practice. El tried to ignore how her heart was pounding in her chest as she found herself time and again sitting on Mike with his arms around her.

"Are you ready?" El asked Mike. "When I close my eyes we're practicing for real."

"I'm ready."

El sat back on the sofa and closed her eyes. A moment later Mike felt her move abruptly, kicking one of her legs out slightly. Her face looked pained and she made a low whining sound. He was impressed at how it really did look like she was having a bad dream. She cried out softly before her eyes opened and he could see real tears brimming them. She looked at him and he knew that was his cue to do his part. He pulled her into his side, wrapping one arm around her shoulder, and proceeded to hug her gently. As he pulled her to his body she rolled into him and was straddling him in seconds as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Mike could smell the strawberry shampoo she had used as she tucked her head under

his chin, her fists balled up on his shirt. He felt her shaking with soft sobs. Knowing he was supposed to also be in character, his arms went around her small body and he held her close, one hand rubbing circles on her back. He swallowed hard and began to recite his lines as he listened to what sounded to him like very real crying coming from her.

Damn. She is good.

"It's okay, Flora. You just had a nightmare. You're safe." He rested his cheek on the top of her head. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He could feel her shake her head, feeling her also pulling on his shirt as she gathered more of it in her small fists.

"You don't have to. It's over now though." Mike (Miles) continued to rub her back. Mike could feel himself relaxing from the feel of her against him. Feeling her breathe as he held her in his arms (even though that was what the script said to do) was making him feel more at ease than he'd felt in a very long time. Maybe in years.

Her soft sobs turned into sniffles as her crying slacked off. Miles was supposed to move his hand to her chin, tilting her head up towards him, and kiss her. This would be the end of the scene.

Mike slowly moved his hand up El's (Flora's) back and let it rest at the back of her head, his fingers in her hair and his thumb grazing her cheek just next to her ear. He gently lifted her chin, their faces mere inches apart.

El heard him gasp quietly, the look on his face causing her alarm.

"What's the matter?" She asked softly, their faces still only separated by the smallest gap.

Without thinking about it Mike answered her truthfully.

"Nothing. Sometimes when I look at you it takes my breath away." Then he closed the gap and kissed her, his lips soft and warm.

El thought it was a line of dialogue she had missed. She kissed him back, the feeling of their lips melding making her heart race. She was

acting her part but she also was enjoying the way his arms felt around her and the way their lips fit together. After a few seconds they pulled apart.

"We should run through it again." El said, only slightly breathless.

They moved back to their starting places and did it all again. El noticed that this time there was no *sometimes when I look at you it takes my breath away* line but she didn't say anything. The kiss went the same way, only perhaps with both of them holding on a little tighter and kissing a little deeper, a soft sigh escaping from El.

Wow. That was the best sound ever. Mike thought as he tilted his head to kiss her more deeply. Then it was over and they both looked at each other.

"Once more?" Mike asked. "I want your dad to be impressed."

El smirked at him but climbed off of his lap and got ready to start the scene again.

They clearly had it down. Their movements were in sync and flowed naturally. Again there was no line about her taking his breath away and El wondered why that was, but once they got to the kiss it was the best one yet. Mike (Miles) had his hands in her hair and she could feel his fingers scrape her head gently, sending shivers down her spine and causing her to squeeze her thighs together, but they were positioned on either side of Mike so when she did it just made her stand up more so that she was slightly above him and his head followed her movement as the kiss continued, his arms moving to her waist and pulling her closer to him.

I don't want this to end but I don't want him to think I'm weird, El thought as her tongue accidentally slipped into his mouth ever so slightly. Upon realizing what she had done she pulled back and ended the kiss. She laid her head back on his chest and remained in her position on his lap.

"Um, Mike? Is it okay if I stay like this for a while longer? It just feels really nice." El said as she listened to his heart beat in his chest.

"You can stay like that for as long as you want, El." His voice was soft and very quiet. He felt her move her arms around his waist and pull herself more into him. His arms wrapped around her frame and he let himself experience feeling her form without having to pretend he was someone else. They were finished practicing and were back to being Mike and El. He realized that he didn't want to let her go. They sat comfortably, just existing together.

"How come you left out that line after the first time we ran the scene?" El asked, her head still pillowied on his chest and her arms still clinging to his body.

"What line?"

"The first time just before the kiss you said a line that went something like *you take my breath away* but you left it out the other times. I thought it was poetic and sounded nice. I couldn't remember it from my script." He could feel El's jaw moving against his chest as she spoke.

Well, fuck.

Mike sighed. He couldn't lie to her.

"That was me. I was caught off guard and just said out loud what I was thinking." Mike cringed, embarrassed that she had noticed the detail.

El was quiet for a minute. Then she sat up, her hands moving from his waist to rest on his shoulders. They locked eyes.

"Really?" She whispered, their noses almost touching.

Mike nodded, never altering his gaze from her big brown eyes.

Without words her hands went into his hair. Their faces crashed together in a show of sensuality, their mouths moving against each other gently but deeply, like they were both trying to heal each other with their lips. They alternated between heavy, deep kisses where their tongues wrestled for dominance, and slow tender kisses where their lips teased and hesitated. In the heat of it El moved her hips and could feel Mike's erection. She ground herself down and he moaned.

"I'm sorry." Mike apologized quickly as he felt her on himself.

"Don't be." El whispered as she moved her mouth to his ear. "I like it."

They continued grinding against each other, both moaning and sighing against the other's mouths as their kisses became more needy and frantic. Mike's hands were on El's waist, his fingers brushing her backside, and he pulled her down into him. She arched her back and pushed down harder, her eyes closed as she felt herself nearing her peak.

"Mike, don't stop. Just keep doing that." El pleaded as he kept his rhythm, the friction of their clothing adding to the delicious tension. She kissed his lower lip before pulling it between her teeth and the feeling made him buck his hips up into her as he continued to pull her down on his cock, the denim of his jeans pulled taut by the lack of space.

"Mike," she looked into his eyes. "I'm, oooh, I'm..." Still looking into his eyes she bit her lip. "Oh, fuck! Please don't stop," she was whispering now. "M-Mike..." He leaned forward as he pulled her down onto him and met her with his hips, kissing her just as she came undone. He could feel the rush of his own frenzy into his jeans. Her fingers clutched his shoulders and their kisses became slower as they caught their breath. Finally she rested her head back on his chest and their heart rates recovered.

"Wow." Mike whispered.

"Yeah." El agreed.

They were still sitting together, El lounging on Mike with her head just under his chin and his hand lazily playing with her hair when the door opened and Hopper walked in.

"Rehearsing, eh?" He asked innocently as he crossed to his desk to retrieve something he had left there. "I'm heading home soon, El. Want me to pick up some dinner?"

El looked at Mike. His eyes were saucers. She smiled at him and lifted herself off him.

"Our practice went really well. I think we have it all figured out." El said, never taking her eyes from Mike's.

"That's good. We're shooting tomorrow. We've got to get as much done before the winter break as we can. Joyce wants this all edited before February." Hopper had found what he had been searching for on his desk and hadn't noticed the guilty look on Mike's face. "So I'll see you at home soon, El?" Hopper asked as he opened the door to leave, really looking at the two for the first time since entering his office. He noticed El's lips looked fuller and she was not wearing lipstick. Her hair, well, both of them looked like they needed a hair brush. He guessed they had really gotten into the kissing part of the scene. He smiled inwardly. Mike was a good kid.

"Sure, I'll be right behind you." El nodded to him as he left. Once the door was closed she turned back to Mike. She kissed his cheek. "I've got to go. I'll see you tomorrow?" She asked, her lips still very close to his ear.

"Tomorrow." His eyes looked dark, his pupils huge. He pulled her down one last time and kissed her, taking her breath away as he did. She softened and ran her hand through his hair.

"Tomorrow." She leaned up and whispered softly into his ear. "I'm always here if you need to talk." She smiled and got up to leave.

"Hey, El?" Mike called to her as she reached the door. She looked back at him, a smile on her face. All of a sudden he couldn't find the words he wanted. "I, uh...I...I'm glad I met you." *Not what I wanted to say.*

El's smile widened and she crossed back to him. She bent down and kissed him one more time. "I'm glad too. So glad."

Got schwifty in that one. It's inevitable with them. There will be a hiccup coming up that will find Mike's friends having to rescue him from himself. Hope you all enjoyed this chapter. As always, thanks for reading.

4. With a Little Help from My Friends

Jim thought the scene went as perfectly as it possibly could the next day. After calling *cut* he was so happy that he hugged Joyce, who had been there to watch. He was amazed at how natural an actor his daughter was, at how willingly she threw herself into the role. He was also proud of Mike. He had filmed several scenes of the show but this was the first one that had any kissing or physical contact and he was surprised as this kid who claimed to not be an actor lost himself in the role he was given. Mike and El knew a secret that Jim didn't know but it had only helped their performance. When her father yelled *cut* El moved her mouth to Mike's ear. "Last time was better," she breathed quietly. Smiling coyly at him as she removed himself from his lap.

"Yeah, your dad was happy but not as happy as I was." Mike whispered back, the possibility of being overheard making it hotter. He smiled wickedly at her.

"Do you promise?" El asked, batting her eyes.

"Promise." Mike looked around the room. Everyone looked busy and were not looking in their direction. He pulled her down and kissed her quickly but passionately. "Do you want to get some coffee?"

It was early afternoon and the two were walking hand in hand along the sidewalk. They were on their way to a little coffee shop that was tucked into the block where the record/book store was and were taking their time ambling to their destination. Mike saw a phone booth and remembered that he had promised his little sister that he would call her and plan their mother's Christmas gift. He had kept forgetting and time was running out. He knew his sister would be antsy about it. He sheepishly asked El if it would be okay to stop and she was more than happy to wait as he made the call.

After a couple of rings, Mike's father answered the phone call.

"Hey Dad, is Holly around? I needed to discuss mom's gift with her." Mike told his father.

"She is but you needn't worry about that. I think you should spend your time making sure your grades are your first priority. If you end with anything less than the Dean's List you might as well not even come home. I'm tired of you wasting your potential. You have too much of your mother in you. It's sickening."

Mike didn't wait around to hear anything else from his father. He simply hung up the phone.

The Mike that emerged from the phone booth was not the Mike who had entered it. El could see that his face was changed, looked bitter and sad. She reached out to pull him close to hug him and see what was wrong but he stiffened at her touch.

"Mike, what's wrong?" El asked, her brow furrowed and her voice slightly shaking.

"Let's just go." He turned and started toward the coffee shop.

In the restaurant Mike was distant. He had a scowl on his face and didn't drink his coffee. El tried to get him to talk to her but he just looked out the window. His mouth was pulled down into a frown and his eyes looked mournful. El was worried. Finally, he spoke.

"El, I don't think this is a good idea." Mike sounded defeated. "I'm only going to end up hurting you. You would be better off not knowing me." His eyes looked glassy. There were clearly tears in them. "I'm sorry." With that he stood up and walked out, leaving El alone at the table, dumbfounded.

Max had just gotten off from her shift at work and was walking down the sidewalk when she spotted El coming toward the store. She could see that El had been crying. Her eyes were red and puffy and she had her arms wrapped around her own body like she was trying to comfort herself. Max stopped her on the sidewalk, noting that El had a faraway look and barely registered that her best friend was standing in front of her. Max put her arm around the girl and together they walked to Max and Lucas' house. Max led her upstairs and sat her on the sofa while she made them cups of tea.

El was crying into a pillow when Max came back with two cups of

tea.

"El, what happened?" Max put her hand on El's shoulder, feeling her trembling. El looked at her and started crying harder.

"I...he... *sniff sniff* ...told me I'd be better off..." El sobbed harder once more.

"I can barely understand you, El. Take some deep breaths. I can wait until you calm down." Max said consolingly.

"Mike...everything was going great and then..." El put her face in her hands. Max could see the tears oozing through her fingers.

"What did he do?" Max asked, starting to get annoyed at Mike.

"He said I'd be better off without him and he walked away!" El sobbed even harder. "He didn't even look back. But he had *promised* me!" Her face went back into her hands.

Max pulled El close and held her while she cried. It lasted for longer than Max had anticipated. Every time El thought she would stop crying she'd think of Mike walking away and she'd cry again. It didn't help that her mind kept playing tricks on her, remembering him walking away juxtaposed with remembering the day in her dad's office and the time Mike sang to her at his apartment. Everything was too overwhelming for her and she was having a hard time getting herself under control.

"I'm sorry, El. But he's just being stupid. He'll come back around. I know Mike." Max tried to comfort her.

"No, I don't think he will." El hung her head and cried more.

"Give him some time. I'll get Lucas to talk to him. It seems odd that he'd do something like that. It's not very *Mike* of him."

They sat on the sofa, El still trying to stifle her tears and failing. Max wondered why Mike had pushed her away. He had seemed so happy the last couple of weeks.

The days were counting down to the winter break. Finals were

ongoing and soon everyone would be leaving for Christmas. Max met El at a coffee shop to see how she was doing before Max left for her own break. El would be staying with her dad at their house near campus.

"How are you feeling?" Max asked as she blew on the cup of hot coffee she was holding.

"I miss him." El almost whispered. "I miss him a lot, Max. I don't know why he would do that. I should have been clear that I had real feelings for him. Maybe he thought I was just using him because of the show. You know, we fooled around and it was amazing but I never actually said how I felt about him. I guess I should have."

"Don't make this your fault, El, because it's not. Mike needs to figure out what he wants out of life. He's a big boy and is able to ask questions. He could have asked to talk about how you guys do or don't feel at any time." Max reasoned with her.

They sat in silence, comfortably drinking their coffee. Looking out the window El said quietly, "I love him."

Max could see that but had wanted El to admit it to herself. They talked a bit more, Max feeling empathetic as El listed all of the things she was currently missing about Mike and how she wasn't looking forward to Christmas anymore.

-

The Thursday before the start of the winter break. Mike met the rest of the guys at Olympus for a game of D&D. It would be the last for a few weeks until the winter break was over and everyone came back from their respective towns. Everyone had finished finals and were deflating after the semester. He hadn't seen El since he told her she'd be better off without him. His emotion was palpable.

"Man, you are down tonight. What is going on with you?" Lucas asked. Lucas already knew, seeing how Max was El's best friend and El had confided in Max the whole story, including how she really felt about Mike and how hurt she now was. He just wanted Mike to talk about it.

"Nothing." He glared at his dungeon master notes. "I told El she'd be better off if I wasn't in her life. I got a jump start on not hurting her forever and I feel shitty now. It was for the best though. She deserves someone better than me." Mike spewed the words.

Will spoke up, rolling a 20 sided die in his hand, "I think you're wrong."

Mike shrugged. "How would you know? You've only seen us together maybe once." Mike snarled, taking his frustration in himself out on the friends who were trying to help him. They all let it happen. They knew he was hurting.

"That's true, but my mother sees you every day and she's mentioned to me more than once that you two have great chemistry. She watches how you interact with her. She thinks you love her. She thinks El feels the same. But that's my mom. She's a romantic. She could be wrong." Will prodded.

Mike was silent, staring at the floor.

Max chimed in. "Why *did* you push her away, Mike? Like, exactly why, not generally why?"

Mike thought for a moment but he was only stalling. He knew why. Seeing his friends all looking at him, waiting patiently for him to tell them why he was hurting himself so much, he hung his head.

"I don't want to hurt her. I'm just going to end up being like my father and she doesn't deserve for that to happen to her. She should have the world. She's the best. I don't deserve the best." Mike put his hands over his eyes.

Lucas, Max, Will, and Dustin all exchanged glances. They had never seen Mike looking so broken.

"Mike, do you respect El? " Max asked, her tone being more matronly.

"Of course I do."

"Then don't you think she deserves to have a say in what happens in her life? Don't you think she deserves to be part of the discussion?"

Max appealed.

Mike raised his head to look at Max. "I didn't think of it that way."

"You aren't your dad, Mike." Dustin stated. "You are the opposite of your dad."

"Dustin is right, Mike." Max got a thoughtful look on her face, like an idea had just come to her. "Hypothetically, let's say you and El got together and, well, oops! She got pregnant. Would you love the child you had with her?"

"Well, obviously I would."

"I'm not looking for a general obligatory love that you should have just because it's your kid. I want to know *specifically* why you would love a child you had with El. You can think about it." Max crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Mike looked at her and then looked at all of his friends. He knew what his answer was. "I'd love it because it would be part El."

"And...?" Max waited for the next part.

"And I love El." Mike put his hands over his eyes again, feeling tears start to well.

"Dude, you should come by the cutting room tomorrow before you leave for home. I have something to show you." Dustin patted Mike on the back. They all looked at their friend, how sad he looked, and knew that if only he'd listen to his heart instead of his head he would be so much happier. Sometimes being too close to the picture makes it hard to see the artwork though. Will knew that. They didn't finish their game that night, electing to just talk and try to get Mike to see that he needed to talk to El. He needed El and it was their job as friends to make him realize that he was indeed good enough.

"Did you ever think that El is smart enough to know what she wants?" Max asked Mike after Dustin had gone to bed. Will had gone home and Mike was getting his coat and gloves on before he went back to his apartment.

"I know she's smart. What do you mean?" He asked, a little annoyed.

"Maybe she wants you. You with any flaws that come with you. Maybe she doesn't care if your dad is an ass because she knows you aren't. Maybe she cries at night because she hasn't talked to you in weeks. Maybe she is just going through the motions of her days now and is planning a sad Christmas because she knows you won't be around. Maybe she loves you too. And by *maybe* I mean definitely."

"What?" Mike's jaw dropped, his face a picture of astonished surprise.

"You think she has cute facial expressions? You should see her when she's crying her eyes out about you. When she tried to stop crying she'd only cry harder. It almost made *me* cry and I don't cry. She is in love with you and she doesn't understand what happened. That makes it even harder for her." Max revealed.

Mike felt his stomach drop. Max's revelation had made his heart leap but it was quickly replaced by the thought of him having made El cry and he felt like someone needed to punch him as hard as they could. He hung his head in shame and wordlessly went to his car. On the drive back to his apartment fresh tears ran down his cheeks as he thought about how badly he wanted to see El and how he might have ruined his chances. He barely slept that night, only dozing off a little before 7:00 a.m. He packed his things and, remembering how Dustin had told him to stop by the cutting room on the way out of town, headed to campus to see what was up.

The cutting room was a mess. Dustin was an expert at what he did but he was always disorganized, at least to an outsider. He actually knew where everything was and could locate something within seconds if asked to do so. Mike knocked quietly on the door, not wanting to disturb him if he needed quiet. Dustin appeared rather quickly, his grin spreading as he saw who was at the door.

"Hey, man. Glad you remembered." Dustin ushered him into the room.

"I'm heading home after this." Mike said. "*Extremely* excited about it." His sarcastic tone made Dustin laugh.

"I'm heading back tomorrow. I needed to finish a couple of things for Dr. Byers and I also wanted you to see this." He motioned for Mike to sit in a chair in front of a monitor. Dustin took a small reel of film from the desk and popped it onto the deck.

"I've been cutting and splicing and it's going pretty well but I couldn't help but notice a few things as I was working. Specifically some things that I cut together on here that I wanted you to see, especially after you started thinking you weren't good enough for El." Dustin was saying as he pushed play on the machine.

There was no sound but Mike watched as Dustin narrated the scenes in front of him.

"Okay, look at this one. You guys are supposed to be arguing about where to put a chair. Look at how you look at her. Do you see? Heart eyes. Now look at her. She's a legitimately good actress, no offense to you, buddy, but look at how she's looking at you when she's supposed to be pissed at you. Heart eyes!" Dustin's voice was raising due to his excitement over explaining what he saw to Mike.

"In this scene here, her character supposedly doesn't like you and is supposed to be glaring at you. We didn't actually use this take and you'll see why. Right there! See how she's looking at you? She was supposed to be scowling but she looks like she's about to hug you. We couldn't use that one. Do you see? Then there's this last one. Your characters both know they have feelings for each other but neither of them have said anything to the other. Look at both of your faces. You both look like you want to kiss each other. It works for the scene but there is definitely some hardcore chemistry going on between you two and you should hang on to that."

Mike sat back in the chair and was thoughtful. "I may have lost my chance, Dustin. I fucked up."

"If she loves you she won't move on in the next two weeks. But you need to be thinking of some way to make her understand that you know you fucked up. Make her know that you are truly sorry and you need to make everything up to her. Just what I think anyway. Your happiness is yours to squander if you desire."

Mike knew Dustin was coming from the heart. He thought about it all the way back to his parents' house. He dreaded being there as soon as he pulled into the driveway but he was looking forward to seeing his sisters.

Holly ran out to meet him. He was happy to see her. It was late afternoon by the time he got there, having left school a little later than he'd planned and stopping for lunch because he was in no rush. She helped him take his things inside.

His mother came out of the kitchen to hug him as his older sister, Nancy, was coming down the stairs to do the same. He had barely been in the house for fifteen minutes when his father started pestering him about his grades and talking about how he was wasting his hard-earned money on his son's "dipshit" career choice. Mike longed to be back at school. He'd rather be alone than deal with his father.

They ate dinner together, the family, and Mike's mom and sisters asked him about school and seemed very interested in the show he was going to be in, wanting to know about his co-star and the other people involved. Mike's father rolled his eyes and made a dismissive sound. He didn't join the conversation but Mike could tell he was nothing short of angry.

After dinner Mike helped his mother clear the table. He was about to go downstairs into the basement to get a book he had wanted when his father called him into the living room.

"What did you need, Dad?" Mike asked, trying to be polite so as not to start any conflicts.

"I think when you go back to school you should refrain from going anywhere near the theater department. You've already spent my money on all the hours you currently have so I really hope you can find a job with the lame degree you are working towards, but I don't think the theater should have anything to do with it and it will only bring you down. So when you go back, no more talking to those people unless the Dean of Students himself says your grades depend on it, and I don't see that happening." Ted Wheeler looked smugly at his son.

At that moment Mike knew he was nothing like his father. He never could be. He grabbed his coat from the coatrack and stormed outside. He was going for a walk to try to clear his head. *I have been so stupid!* He thought as he walked down the block and turned left. *Why did I let him get to me? I may have ruined the best thing that ever happened to me!*

He turned the corner into a strong wind that blew icy on his cheeks. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and kept walking. When his right hand went into the pocket of his coat he felt something crinkle. He removed it to see a note. He stopped in the street to read it under the light of the street lamp.

Dear Mike,

I wish you didn't have to go away for Thanksgiving. I wish you could stay here with me. I'm really going to miss you! I want you to know that I will always be here for you. Whatever you need. I promise (like the song)!

I hope to see you as soon as you get back. When you feel down, remember that I'm here to bring you back up.

*Love,
El*

Mike remembered the night he had sung to her. He had taken a different jacket with him the next day when he left for home so this note must have been in the pocket of his coat since then.

He sprinted back to his house. He had to talk to Nancy immediately.

What will Nancy tell Mike he should do. I have an idea...

Thanks again so much for reading!

5. All Apologies

His mother's grandfather clocked had just chimed 8:30 when Mike started his journey back to El. His sister Nancy, although wary of his desire to leave that very night, had told him that if he loved the girl he should do whatever he could to let her know. She had been sympathetic as he told her of what he had done, how he had pushed El away, and how miserable he had felt the last few weeks. He told her what his friends said about the situation and she agreed that he needed to communicate better and say how he really feels, as well as agreeing with them that Mike was nothing like their father. With a promise from Nancy that she would make sure their little sister Holly understood why he left, Mike threw his bags in his car and started the two and a half hour drive back. Nancy had mentioned snow in the forecast so she had been a little more worried about him but he had told her that he was going even if he had to walk.

And it wasn't snowing yet. It was extremely cold, the kind where your fingers get stiff and ache if you don't move them around, but the snow had not started so Mike tried to get as far as he could before that happened.

As it was, he had a good thirty minutes before the snow started. At first it was just a few flakes but soon the few flakes became numerous wads of snow barreling towards the ground, hitting Mike's windshield with a popping *splat* noise and causing him to slow down, his wipers doing all they could to clear his line of vision. He pressed on, the thought of seeing El's face keeping him focused as the road became white, the snow stalking his car as he drove through the dark. Luckily for Mike, traffic was light and he didn't cause any harm the several times he found himself driving in the middle of the road because he couldn't see the shoulders.

About an hour away from school there was a shortcut of sorts. It was a winding road that was not used much by mainstream drivers but the lack of traffic made it seem faster when traveling to or from school so a lot of kids used it. Mike had decided a little after he left his house that he was going to take the shortcut... the trail, the kids called it. At the exit for the shortcut there was a truck stop. He pulled

into the lot and ran for the pay phone, his hands already cold from the short trip from his parking space to the phone.

Mike held the receiver to his ear, waiting for the line to connect.

Come on, please pick up.

"Hello?" El's sweet voice on the line.

"El? It's Mike. Listen, I've got to be quick here, but I'm on my way to your house. I'm about an hour away."

"Why? It's late, Mike." She sounded sad. It broke his heart.

"I know and I'm sorry. I just really need to see you. It's important. I need to talk to you. I just don't want to freak you out by knocking on your door late at night so I wanted to let you know. I also don't want your dad to shoot me or anything."

"He's not here tonight. Christmas party with his colleagues. He'll sleep in his office so he doesn't have to drive home."

"Is it okay that I'm coming? I *really* need to talk to you." Mike waited for her answer, watching the snow continue to fall steadily.

"I don't know..." El was definitely hurt. He could hear it in her voice.

"Please, El? It's snowing really hard and I need to get back on the road soon."

"It's snowing?" El looked out her window for the first time that night, seeing the blanket of white that covered the driveway and front lawn. Thinking of Mike driving at night in the still falling snow made her stomach drop. "Okay. I'll be here."

"I'll see you in about an hour, El." Mike started to hang up the phone.

"Mike!" El called before he got the receiver too far away from his ear.

"Yes?"

"Just be careful, all right?" El sounded worried.

"I'll see you soon, El." Mike's tone was soft. Hearing her voice was all he needed to keep moving forward.

El replaced the phone in its cradle and stood looking out the window. Hearing Mike's voice was not something she had expected tonight and she had butterflies in her stomach thinking about seeing him. She didn't want to let herself get too excited for what he needed to tell her though. She had been hurt and was still hurting and told herself she needed to hope for the best but expect the worst. That idea made her shiver, as now the worst would be for Mike to have an accident in the snow and not make it to her at all. She dismissed the thought. She busied herself making a fire in the fireplace. She put a kettle on the stove thinking she would turn it on a little closer to when she thought he'd be there. At least she could offer some tea. Looking at the clock, it had only been fifteen minutes since she'd hung up the phone. She paced around the room.

She was already in her pajamas and wondered if she should change but then decided that it was late and it was cold out and pj's were the way to go. She didn't know what Mike needed to talk to her about. If it was good like she hoped, he wouldn't care what she was wearing. If it was bad, then *she* wouldn't care what she was wearing. She did check herself in the mirror, making sure her hair was tamed as much as possible and then brushing her teeth. *Just in case.*

An hour after Mike called there was still no sign of him.

Mike was on the shortcut, making his way up the twisting, winding road that was flanked by tall trees, the weight of snow heavy on the boughs causing them to bend. The headlights reflected only white in front of him. As he drove, slowly so he stayed on the road, he half expected a topiary lion to jump out of the forest and attack. He was trying to find a station that would give a weather report when all of a sudden he felt cold air blowing where heat was supposed to be coming out of the vents.

What the hell? Mike punched the dashboard, thinking physically beating the machine would fix it, but still the cold air blew. He turned off the heater, cursing under his breath. It wasn't long before he could see the condensation of his warm breath in his very cold car. His fingers and toes were getting numb but he told himself with

every minute he was getting closer to El.

El went from looking out the window to pacing back and forth from the fireplace to the kitchen, then back to looking out the window. It had been an hour and twenty minutes since she had talked to Mike. She was getting more worried by the minute. She nervously picked at her cuticles.

Mike's car slid three times on the road. He kept control, almost sliding into the trees the last time, but was able to right himself onto the road before his tires pulled him into the woods. Finally he topped a ridge and could see the lights from the town a short distance away. He could feel his heart start to beat faster. He drove in the middle of the road all the way to the edge of campus, heading directly to El's house.

It had been an hour and forty five minutes now. El was beyond worried. She was trying not to hyperventilate, her imagination running wild with scenarios that she wished she wasn't thinking about having happened. She looked out the window again to see the nothing in her driveway. She went to the kitchen and turned on the kettle to boil, thinking wishfully. She was standing at the counter, tears stinging her eyes, when she heard the slam of a car door.

She stood at the door, her heart in her throat, waiting for a knock.

Knock knock

"El? It's me, Mike."

She opened the door and her breath caught. She could see snow in his hair and could feel the cold radiating from him. She stepped back so he could enter the house.

"Hi." He said, his eyes locking with hers and looking warm.

"Hi." She murmured back, happy that he was safe but still sad and worried and confused about why he was there.

She had closed the door and they stood in the living room, the fire blazing in the fireplace and all of the Christmas lights she had strung to occupy herself the previous week giving off a romantic glow.

"El, I am so sorry. I was so selfish." Mike started. El could still feel the cold coming from him.

"Do you want a blanket? Why are you so cold?" She asked, seeing how he kept blowing into his hands so try to warm them.

"My heater stopped working about forty minutes ago. I'm fine. I need to tell you something. Just listen, okay?" Mike said as he put his hands on hers for just a second. They felt like ice. "That day that I called my house from the payphone, the day I said you'd be better off without me, my dad had answered and made me feel worthless and he got into my head. All I could think was that I might turn out like him and I couldn't stand the thought of me ever yelling at you or making you feel inferior. It's like, you know how sometimes you become what you hate? It was like that. And I was afraid. But I should have talked to you about how I was feeling. It was so selfish of me to walk away from you without even talking to you or even telling you really why. I don't know if you can forgive me but I will forever be sorry that I pushed you away." Mike had tears in his eyes.

"It's okay, Mike. It's not like we were anything really anyway." El hated saying that but she didn't want to get too eager and then have it tall taken away again. She looked at the floor.

"But we were. We both know it. El, you are the first thing I think of when I wake up in the morning and the last thing I think of before I fall asleep. These last few weeks my mind was preoccupied with thinking about you. How are you feeling? Are you cold? Are you tired? Are you hungry? Do you miss me? Because I miss you. I miss you so much. I was so stupid, El."

El stood hugging herself, feeling tears quietly slip down her face.

"I talked to the guys and Max and they made me realize some things. Then at home today my dad was on me again so I went for a walk and when I put my hand in my pocket I found the note you had left me and I had to come back. I had to talk to you. I had to tell you..."

"Tell me what, Mike?" El sniffed. Mike stepped closer to her.

"I love you, El." Mike gently cupped her cheek in his cold hand,

brushing away a tear with his thumb. "I don't deserve you and I know that. But I love you and I had to tell you." Tears were streaming down Mike's own cheeks. "I had to know that I at least tried. If you want me to leave, I'll go. I just wanted you to know how sorry I am. I promised to always be here. I want to keep that promise."

El hadn't expected his declaration. She was speechless and stood looking into his eyes. She couldn't find any words, or her tongue wouldn't work or her synapses weren't firing, something was keeping her from being able to speak.

Mike took her silence as defeat. He let his thumb trace her jaw line. "Okay. I just wanted you to know. I'll leave you alone now. I'm sorry, El. I'm sorry I hurt you."

Mike crossed back to the door. He looked back at her, still standing rooted in place, and then he walked out of the house, closing the door gently behind him.

Hearing the door close, El finally shook herself back to reality. She ran to the door and threw it open. Mike was still standing on the porch.

"Mike! Don't go." She cried.

He turned around sharply, having not expected her to reopen the door to him, and she crashed into his arms. Her face was hot buried in the crook of his cold neck and he could feel her tears on his skin. She was only wearing socks so he picked her up and carried her back inside the house.

"Please don't go. I need you here. Please stay here. I love you too, Mike. I love you so much." She pleaded, kissing him between every word, her lips making his body temperature start to rise even before they got back inside.

"You're so cold. You need to warm up." El breathed, having been kissing him since they reentered the house and realizing how her warm lips contrasted to his cold ones. She slipped out of his arms and pulled him over to the rug in front of the fireplace. She removed his coat and placed a blanket from the couch around his shoulders before

going to the kitchen to get the tea she had prepared. She poured the boiling water in the cups, having already placed the tea bags in them, and brought them back to the rug where Mike was rubbing his hands together in front of the fire.

"Let's take off your shoes. If your hands are cold then I know your feet are too." El said as she moved to his feet to unlace his shoes. She could feel how cold his feet were through his socks. "Maybe you should take a warm shower. That might warm you back up." El thought aloud.

"I don't really want to leave you right now." Mike said. "I want to be close to you."

Mike was sitting on the soft rug with his back against the sofa. El moved to his side, wrapping the blanket around herself as well. She snuggled against Mike in an effort to use her own body heat to warm him up. He was very receptive to her tactics but she could feel that his skin wasn't getting warm as quickly as she'd hoped.

"Mike, you're still too cold. Come on, let's go fix that." El stood up, offering her hand so Mike could pull himself off the floor. She led him down the hallway to her room and pulled the covers of her bed back. "Take off your pants and shirt." Mike did what he was told. El crossed to a small switch and flipped it, turning on the Christmas lights she had also put up in her room. As Mike crawled into her bed, wearing his boxers only, El stripped her pajamas off, leaving her in only her panties. Mike noticed that they were lacy pink ones, his eyes moving from her lower half to her perfect pert breasts, and almost had to manually close his jaw. She got into the bed next to him, immediately wrapping herself around him, her leg over his, her arms around his waist. Her soft skin felt like fire against his cold torso.

"My first major was medicine. I couldn't do it because I get too weak in the knees when I think about how bad an injury would hurt but I did learn a few things. Skin to skin body contact is one of the best ways to warm up a cold person." El was saying, her head resting on his chest as she moved her arm and leg over him to distribute her warmth to him. She had acted so quickly that she was only beginning to realize that they were practically naked.

Mike had realized it immediately. He looked down at her as she continued to try to make him warmer. "You are so beautiful." Mike said, barely a whisper. She stopped moving her arm and looked at him, their noses almost touching. Her lips parted and she ghosted them over his, just barely touching him. He did the same. Back and forth until he finally turned them over, her warm body underneath him making things stir. He could feel warmth rushing into certain parts of him, that was clear.

He wasn't going to rush into anything though. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her, pulling her as close to him as he could. He felt her legs wrap around him but still he focused on just kissing her. He had been dreaming of doing it for weeks now, wanting to relish in the feeling of her body underneath him while his lips offered his sincerest apologies for having hurt her. He took his time, opening his eyes occasionally to see how the little colored lights illuminated her perfect face, her eyes closed and her lips parted, waiting for him to return his to her.

"Mike." El whispered. She could of course feel him on her leg, her panties damp with desire. "Please touch me."

Mike gulped. He had wanted to do just that since she climbed into the bed but he was going to let her be the guide. He wasn't going to do anything she didn't want.

"Are you sure you want me to?" He asked, his lips trailing along her neck, making her arch her back and pushing her breasts into his chest.

"Mike, I'm 21 years old. I know what I want."

"Noted." He grinned at her, seeing how her eyes sparkled with the reflection of the little lights.

His hand trailed down her body, going painfully slow, stopping at her breasts. He gently squeezed one while his mouth went to the other, swirling his tongue around her nipple and eliciting a hiss and a groan from her. He alternated the movements, giving both breasts equal attention. He could feel her writhing underneath him, trying to get herself in a position where she could use him as leverage to achieve some relief. She was throbbing. He smiled as he looked at her, his

hand leaving her breast and moving down the front of her body, barely touching her skin, his fingertips teasing as he made his way to where she wanted him. He brushed his hand over the fabric of her panties, feeling her wetness. He pushed into the fabric, causing her to moan and try to push herself down more on his hand. He slid one finger underneath the elastic of her panties, feeling her leg twitch as she felt him near her center. He pushed them to the side before he rubbed her outer lips, teasing her and spreading her arousal with his fingers.

"God, please, Mike!"

He stopped what he was doing. She looked confused but then he reached underneath her and pulled her panties down her legs. She raised herself up so he could get them off properly. He moved up and kissed her again before disappearing under the comforter, his head between her legs. She felt his breath on her first, being so wet that the air from his exhalation felt cool on her skin. Then she felt his tongue barely at her opening, moving back and forth, up and down, darting inside a little every now and then. *Oh, fuck. That feels good!* She grabbed her breasts and squeezed as he started drawing the alphabet with his tongue on her most sensitive area. Her breath was heavy, his actions causing her to pant and wiggle, her hands gripping his hair, trying to not be too rough with his head but her pleasure causing her to pull tighter. She felt him slip a finger inside her, still continuing to lap at her with his tongue. He slipped in another finger, curling them slightly.

"Oh, fuck, Mike! I'm so close. I'm gonna come on your hand." Her teeth clenched, sweat beading on her forehead, ass slightly raised to give him more access.

Mike kept going, her phrasing going straight down, making him rock hard. As her breathing quickened, he could feel her tighten around his fingers. He was moving them at a fast pace, his hand slick with her juices. He licked her again and felt her start to tremble.

"M-Mike. Please. I need you to..." He felt her spasm around his fingers, crying out as she did. He continued to pump in and out slowly until she finished, kissing her center before he pulled his hand away and made his way back up to cuddle with her.

She was not finished with him. She rolled her naked body on top of him, lying on his chest, her legs on his legs. He was still wearing his boxers and she moved her hands down to his waistband, kissing him all the while.

I can't kiss him enough. I need it like I need air. El thought as her lips tangled with his own. She continued to push his boxers down his legs but could only move them a few inches. She pulled herself away from kissing him long enough to tug them down the rest of the way. He kicked out of them. She was back on him in a second, her body feeling electric against his now fully naked one, her lips on his, his arms around her and her hands in his hair again, only much gentler this time, the feel of his soft hair in her fingers only serving to turn her on more.

She could feel him between her legs. She wanted him, all of him. From her position lying on his chest, she pulled her legs up until she could feel the tip of his erection at her entrance. Moving herself over the length of it, Mike moaned as he felt her slide down his cock, not letting it slide inside her but causing them both to wail from the sensation. She watched his face as she did it again, how his eyebrows moved and his lips contorted feeling her on him, not even inside her yet. She wanted to see what face he made when she did that.

She pulled up once more, looking directly into his eyes. "I want you, Mike. Is that okay?" She pouted the question, as if he might possibly say no.

He could only nod as she pushed herself back toward him at the perfect angle for him to slide into her. She was so well lubricated by that point that even though it was a very tight squeeze she took it in its entirety easily.

"Fuck, El! Shit, you are so tight! Oh my god!" Mike held her in place with his hands, her hips wanting to move back and forth already, wanting to ride him to ecstasy, but he held her in place. He held himself deep inside her until she whined that she needed him to move, needed him to *fuck her* as she so eloquently put it. He grinned and started thrusting, getting more and more forceful each time she encouraged him.

He let her stay on top for then, watching her face, watching himself disappear into her as she moved herself up and down, sometimes taking him all the way in and then moving her hips in a circular pattern that was making him crazy. He was going to hold out for her though.

She leaned down to join their mouths again, hot hungry kisses as they continued their dance. Mike flipped her over onto her back, never pulling himself all the way out, and from that angle pushed into her harder. The sensation of his weight on top of her coupled with feeling of him hammering into her was making El's mind hazy. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him close to her.

"You're going to make me come again. I'm going to do it with you on top of me this time." She breathed, knowing what she was saying was turning him on, describing what was happening to her. She knew because it was doing the same for her.

"Fuck yes you are." Mike kissed her neck, sucking on her skin.

"Keep doing that...right there, Mike! Don't stop...don't slow down. Oh, fuck! Oh, Mike, I'm...uhnnnnn!" Her words dragged as she lost herself in her second climax.

Watching her face made Mike start to see his own stars. She was still in the midst of trembling around him when he let himself go, feeling the surge of his own.

"I love you, El." He sighed, his head falling to rest on her chest.

"I love you, Mike." She kissed his head and wrapped him in her arms.
"Are you warmer now?"

Mike laughed.

So I don't know how I feel about this chapter. I'm glad they're back together but I'm not sure I love how I wrote it. Maybe I can bring it all home in the next couple. Thanks for reading. Sorry if it sucks.

6. Blue Christmas

So, this chapter could be skipped if anyone isn't into some things that will be described in some detail. It's not called *Blue Christmas* because it's sad. Totally different *blue* in this instance. But it's Christmas for them (It's Chrissmiss!) and I wanted to give them the opposite of suffering. I will circle back around to the main story once the break is over and all the kids come back. Thanks for reading, and no worries if you skip this one.

Mike and El didn't sleep much the night he drove through the snow to get back to her. They dozed occasionally, both spent from the mindblowing sex they kept having, but then would wake up and start the process all over. El hadn't asked if he would have to return to his hometown for the remainder of the break and he hadn't told her that he was planning on staying as near to her as she would allow. There would be time for that, and he kind of liked the urgency in her bouts of lovemaking, like he might disappear so she had to make everything count.

Late the next morning they finally decided to get out of bed. They were both hungry, having used countless calories in their exertions the night before.

"Shit, your dad is going to be here. How am I going to explain being here?" Mike worried as he put his clothes back on. His shoes and coat were still lying in the living room in front of the fireplace where they had left them.

"Don't worry, Mike. It'll be fine. I'm old enough to die in a war. I think I'm old enough to have a boy sleep in my bed with me." El winked at him, pulling him down into a kiss before they left her room. She had thrown on an oversized t-shirt and nothing else, which Mike noted in the back of his mind.

They walked down the hallway to the living room. Jim Hopper sat in a chair reading the newspaper. He looked at them like he had been expecting them.

"Wheeler, good morning. I wondered whose giant shoes these could

be in my floor. I had an entire list of suspects but narrowed it down to the only one I knew my daughter would let in here at night when it was snowing outside. I see my deductions were correct."

"Hey, Professor Hopper. I'm sorry if I wasn't supposed to be here." Mike looked guilty and hung his head.

"El and I live together because it's cheaper than her paying for her own place while she's still in school. She is an adult. If she wanted you to stay, then you could stay." Jim was impressed at how laid back he sounded. That had been the deal but he had never had to put it into effect until just now. Mike was the first person who had spent the night there.

"That's very cool of you, sir."

"We're going to find some breakfast." El pulled Mike into the kitchen, saving him from further embarrassment from her "ultra-hip-if-he-does-say-so-himself" dad.

She opened the cupboards and the refrigerator. She spied Eggo waffles and settled on those. "These okay?" She asked.

"Most definitely."

It would take a minuscule amount of time for the waffles to finish but El still hopped up onto the counter. Mike crossed to her and ran his hand up her thigh.

"We have to be quiet!" El hissed at him as his fingers walked their way up her leg.

"We're not doing anything. Did you want to?" Mike taunted, both of his hands moving around to grip her bare backside as she sat on the edge of the countertop. Her head fell into his shoulder in her attempt to block her whimpering. He pulled her closer to him.

"My dad's just in the other room." She purred, nuzzling his neck and feeling his pulse with her nose.

Mike was enjoying the feeling of holding her like that, his hands supporting her weight by holding tightly onto her ass, her legs

loosely wrapped around his waist. The look of trust in her eyes was hypnotic. He knew she was right though. He wasn't ready to have her dad walk in on them in a compromising position. He sat her back on the counter and reached for her hands, interlocking their fingers, their foreheads touching.

"How long can you stay?" El asked softly. The waffles had popped up from the toaster but they could wait. El wanted to know how much time she'd have with Mike before he had to go back home.

"How long do you want me to stay?" He smiled.

She kissed him then. He was already so close to her face and she had been watching his lips as he spoke. Seeing his smile when he was that close to her caused a knee-jerk reaction and her mouth went to his like a moth to a flame.

"I'm not going back." He said when they came up for air. "I know my dad will be pissed but he doesn't actually care. He just wants to have it look perfect to the outside world. My sister Nancy promised she'd make sure our younger sister still has a nice Christmas. I want to stay with you. Well, I'm sure your dad won't want me staying *with* you the entire time but I want to spend as much time with you as you'll let me. If that's okay."

El threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. He was only a little taller than her when she sat on the counter so her head could easily rest on his shoulder from where she was perched. "That's the best Christmas gift ever." She whispered to him.

The Eggos had gotten cold by the time they finally remembered them. They just laughed and threw them into the microwave for a few seconds to heat them back up. They sat at the table side by side, her leg brushing against his as she talked animatedly. Occasionally he would rest his hand on her inner thigh, but not move his fingers upward, which was frustrating her to no end. He knew it.

"Do you think your dad knows any good mechanics who could fix the heater in my car?" Mike asked as he finished his waffles.

"You can ask him. I need to take a shower so you can talk to him

about it while I'm in there." El said as she took their plates to the sink.

While El showered Mike asked Jim if he knew of any trustworthy mechanics. He told him about his heater and what had happened. He really needed to get it fixed now that it was the dead of winter and it would still be cold for months. Hopper told him who he used when he had car issues and Mike decided to give them a call.

Hopper had a few more questions for him though.

"So is this method acting or do you two actually have something? She talks about you all the time, I don't think she even realizes it. I do not want her to get hurt. She's been moping around for the last few weeks. Do you have any idea why that was?" Jim quizzed, sipping coffee from a mug that said #1 Dad.

"I do. I'm sorry. She will never will feel like that again, at least not because of me."

Mike then told him a shortened version of the chain of events that had led him back to El. He told him about his father, about realizing his feelings, about needing to see her no matter the road conditions.

"I love her more than anything. I would do anything for her." Mike's eyes never wavered even though Jim was trying to look at him with a stern fatherly scowl. Hopper seemed satisfied. He liked Mike and he knew his daughter felt something that seemed more than a simple crush. He wanted to see them happy.

"That's good. She deserves to be loved. She's the best thing that ever came into my life and I do not *ever* want to have to see her cry over something that you do. Understand? You be honest with her and you always put her *first*. Get it? I trust you, Mike. Don't give me a reason to change my mind." He shook his paper and went back to reading the news. "You can use our phone to call the auto shop. I hope they can squeeze you in this close to the holidays."

El had been crossing the hall from the bathroom back to her bedroom to get dressed when she heard their voices drift down the corridor. She didn't want to eavesdrop but she couldn't help overhear Mike tell

her dad that he loved her. Her hand went to her mouth to hold back a squeal that tried to escape. *He told my father that he loves me? He seriously told him? This must be real!*

El dressed quickly and joined the two men she loved most in the living room. Mike's face lit up when he saw her, causing the smile she already wore to intensify.

"I need to drop my car off at the shop to get the heater fixed. I don't know how long it'll take them. I can call you when it's finished and we can go out to dinner if you want?" Mike phrased it like a question, not wanting to leave her but also not wanting to be too clingy.

"Can I just go with you? I don't mind waiting with you." El offered. Mike seemed to relax as he nodded his head, relieved that he wouldn't have to be separated from her for the entire day.

The auto shop turned out to be only about a block away from Mike's apartment. The mechanic had told him it should be ready by the time they closed, around 6:00, so Mike and El had a little over four hours to kill until his car was ready. As they stepped out onto the sidewalk, not wanting to wait in the auto shop, El tried to hide her shy smile. She knew how she wanted to spend the next few hours.

Mike noticed her face. He *always* noticed her face.

"What are you smiling about?" They were holding hands as they walked and he nudged his shoulder into her playfully as he asked the question.

"Nothing. Everything." El's smile grew as she looked at him.

"Wanna go wait at my place? It's kind of just around the corner." Mike asked, honestly having only the purest intentions, not wanting them to walk around in the cold for hours or end up spending money they didn't need to spend in small shops around the town.

"I absolutely do."

As they walked toward Mike's place they passed a few stores with things on display in the windows. Passing a jewelry store, El's head turned quickly as something caught her eye.

"What? See something you like?" Mike asked as he felt her hand tug his when she stopped and he kept walking.

"I just like silver, or white gold, or platinum jewelry. I'm like a raven, I like shiny things." She laughed and smiled.

"What do you like best? Like, necklaces, bracelets..." Mike inquired.

"I like necklaces. And rings." They looked at each other, the simple words holding more meaning than either of them anticipated, both of them feeling the same *whooshing* feeling inside. El laughed nervously as she took his hand and started walking again in the direction of Mike's apartment.

"It's chilly in here. Let me turn up the thermostat." Mike said as they entered his apartment. He had turned it down to save electricity when he left for home.

"Do you mind if I use your bathroom?" El asked, innocently enough she thought.

"Sure." Mike turned up the heat and headed into the kitchen. "I'm going to see what I have to drink in the fridge."

El went down the hallway to the bathroom. She didn't really need to use it; she wanted to surprise Mike and hoped he'd be up for what she had planned. She had taken her coat off and hung it on the hook Mike kept near his front door when they got to the apartment so now she was just wearing her regular clothes, jeans and a shirt that buttoned up the front. It was baby blue with navy pinstripes. She removed everything she was wearing, then put the shirt back on, leaving it unbuttoned with the cuffs of the sleeves unbuttoned and turned up. She looked in the mirror. Satisfied with what she saw, she walked back into the living room.

Mike had found a couple of sodas in his refrigerator and was sitting on his sofa about to pick up the remote control when he looked up and saw El standing at the edge of the room. She was naked except for her shirt. His mouth dropped open.

Not waiting for a response, El walked towards him. She crawled onto

his lap. Sitting chest to chest, she put her arms around his neck and played with his hair that hung just above his collar.

"I thought it was so hot this morning when I was only wearing a shirt and you were fully clothed." El hummed as she kissed his face, everywhere but his mouth. "I felt so exposed but safe at the same time. I was hoping I could feel that way again."

Mike shifted and she could feel him. She could feel the roughness of his jeans against her. It was different than the time in her father's office since she wasn't wearing anything now. The intensity was astonishing. He pulled back to look at her, how she was sitting on him, her breasts peeking through the opened shirt she wore. He moved his hands to her legs, moving them up until they were squeezing her ass gently, causing her to push herself down on him.

"You are the sexiest thing I have ever seen, El." Mike noticed that she was trying to grind into him again. He was going to make her wait. He kissed her instead. Her hands were in his hair and her body on his was frying his brain a little but since they were alone and could do anything they wanted he was going to make it memorable for her. He touched her everywhere but where she wanted most, teasing her into frustration. She was starting to get irritated, he could tell, so finally he gave in and moved his hand to her folds, just barely touching her.

"Mike. Finally." She exhaled as she felt his fingers exploring. She moved back a tiny bit to give him more room. She threw her head back before she shrugged off her shirt, leaving her totally bare and sitting on his jeans, inches from the noticeable bulge in his pants. "Can you imagine how hot this looks? You sitting here all dressed with me sitting naked on you, your fingers inside me?" He didn't know how long he would be able to keep his jeans on, he was so aroused. He was feeling restrained.

She kept going with the dirty talk. *She is fucking amazing.* Mike thought. *She is going to end up getting me off just by talking.*

"Do you like watching your fingers disappear into me, Mike?" She was moving herself back and forth on them as he thrust them in and out. He wasn't going very fast, wanting to make it last longer. "I like it when you have your fingers in me and then you use your thumb,"

she was breathing the words as he moved his thumb over her sweet spot, making her moan.

"You like it when I do that?" Mike decided to join in.

"Uh huh." She nodded as she looked down and watched him move into her.

"I can tell that you do. I like making you moan." He removed his hand and looked at her face.

"Please don't stop, I'll do whatever you want." El begged. His hand was resting on her thigh and she tried to move herself against him. He held her so she couldn't.

"Maybe I'll just put my hand here." He said, moving his entire palm over her center. He pressed and then, keeping the heel of his hand against her, moved his fingers back into her. She was panting now.

"Oh, please don't take it away again. It feels so good. I need you to keep it there." El was squirming in his lap. "I need you to make me come, Mike. Will you?"

If he hadn't been turned on already that would have been enough to do it. He sped up the pace of his fingers, watching her face. He stopped holding her still with his other hand so she could move herself how he knew she wanted to. He felt her push down on his hand as he continued to stroke his fingers into her. His jeans had a wet spot on them where she was sitting.

Her eyes snapped open and she looked directly at him. She was panting her words. "Don't stop. Please don't stop. Keep doing that. I can feel it. I'm...I'm...Mike! Oh! Fuuuuccck!" Her hips slammed down onto his hand and he felt her spasm throbbing around his fingers. Before she could even catch her breath he was kissing her hungrily.

He flipped her onto the sofa and ripped his shirt off. She was reaching for his belt and the button of his jeans and he helped her, wanting to be as fast as he could be. He kicked his pants off and was on top of her, kissing frantically.

"I wanted to take you so badly in the kitchen this morning. You have no idea." Mike moaned as he continued to kiss her. He was pressing against her leg and could feel her moving to try to get closer to his hard cock.

"I do so have an idea." She said. "I wanted you too. I've been thinking about it all day." El said. She was biting his neck now.

"Fuck that feels awesome." Mike was moving himself into position. "I don't know if I can wait much longer. I need to be inside you."

"Is that what you want?" She asked innocently. "I want to give you what you want." Her voice sultry.

Mike filled her all the way in one stroke, holding himself as deep as he could go for a few seconds so she could get used to the sensation. She lost her breath and he watched as she regained her ability to respire. Her legs wrapped around him as he started moving slowly, wanting to feel her. He also wanted to hear her talk that way some more. It was driving him wild.

"Is...that...what...you...wanted?" She asked, the force of his thrusts making her stutter her sentence. "You...wanted...to...be...so...deep..." Her fingers grabbed for his shoulders, trying to hold on as he rocked himself into her.

"Is that what *you* wanted? To feel me so...deep?" Mike pushed in and held himself there. He leaned forward and kissed her before she could answer him. He could feel her trying to push him in more, or trying to pull him inside. He was lying on top of her, feeling her breasts pressed firmly against his chest. He moved his head to her ear, nibbling on her earlobe.

"Mike! Oh, god, that feels so good. Oh, fuck, I love you. I need to feel you all the time." El breathed heavily. Mike's face against hers, teasing her with his lips.

"Turn around." His tone husky, he pulled out and moved her to her knees. His dominance made her feel a new surge of arousal and she looked over her shoulder at him. He was admiring his view, her knees on the sofa, arms down, ass up, looking back at him. His eyes

caught hers and he was back inside her in an instant. The suddenness of his movements caused her to moan loudly, the new angle sending him even deeper than before, and she had to dig her fingers into the cushions of the sofa to steady herself.

"Oh my god! You're so deep! Miiikke!" She was meeting his thrusts with her hips, pushing back as he pushed forward.

"You look so fucking hot like that. Does this feel good? Do you want me to stop?" He asked, never slowing his rhythm.

"No, please don't st-stop. Please keep fu-fucking m-m-me." She sounded like she was afraid he might actually be serious.

He pushed her down so that her legs were flush with the sofa cushions. He kept himself inside her, lying on top of her so that they were pressed tightly together. The new position made her even tighter on him. It was magnificent. He reached around her front, snaking his way from her breast to her core. He could feel himself inside her and moved his fingers up to find the spot that would make her lose control. He started rubbing it gently as he rammed into her from behind. He was close, he could tell. But so was she. He kissed the back of her neck. She turned her head as far as she could and caught his lips in hers, their tongues brushing together with great need. Her toned ass was soft against his pelvis as he plunged deep into her folds, his hand continuing to tease and rub.

"You're going to make me c-come again. I'm going to come on your hard c-cock." El said matter-of-factly. "You're fucking me so h-hard. I can't h-help it. Don't stop! Don't stop. Please." She begged so sweetly.

"I'm not going to stop. I'll make you come every day." Mike reassured her. He was so close. If she narrated this any more he was going to lose it.

"Do you prom-promise?" El started to tremble.

"Oh, fuck, El! You are so hot!"

"Mike! You're making me come! Oh! Oh...uhn. Oh fuck! Your big cock is making me c-c-come!"

Mike couldn't take any more. He buried himself as deep as he could go. His vision went white and he could hear her moaning as she felt herself peak, crying his name. He emptied into her, feeling her spasm around his rigid shaft. He kissed the back of her neck, trailing over her shoulders with his lips. Her hair was damp with sweat. He finally pulled himself out and she rolled over. She had tears in her eyes.

"El, are you okay? Did I hurt you?" Concern written all over Mike's face.

"No, that was incredible. You definitely didn't hurt me. That was just too amazing." She snuggled against his chest. He pulled a blanket from the back of the sofa over the both of them.

"I love you. So much." Mike was stroking her hair.

"I know. You showed me."

They were back at the auto shop a little before 6:00. The walk there had been full of giggles and touches and hand holding and kisses. Mike's car was ready and after they picked it up they went to get some dinner at a little burger place that was near campus. They played footsie under the table while eating a huge plate of chili cheese fries. They were so happy.

Despite Hopper's chronic case of eye rolling, El persuaded Mike to stay with them at least until Christmas Day. She was beside herself with having him around all the time and he was also loving it, how they would sleep together (actual sleep included) and eat together and just be with each other. Mike found himself thinking on more than one occasion that this was how he wanted it to be forever. On the 22nd of December he said he had to go do a few things and left her alone for several hours. She had asked what he was doing, where he was going, but he wouldn't give her an answer. Her face when she was frustrated and almost angry was too cute.

First he went to the jewelry store they had passed a few days before. He talked to the manager and told him what he was looking for and the manager guided him to the selection of pieces that fit Mike's description of what he wanted. He found the perfect thing.

Next he went to his apartment. He set about making a mixed tape that included some songs he deemed special to the both of them. While he was there his phone rang.

"Hello?" Mike answered, worried about who might be calling him.

"Hey, man! Why are you at your place?" It was Lucas.

"Oh, I just decided I didn't want to deal with my dad this year. I'm just hanging out here." Mike lied.

"Dude! You could have come over to my house. My mom always makes too much food. We'd love to have you." Lucas offered.

"Thanks but I'm all set here. I have some ham and some liquor. I'm good. I hope you guys have a merry Christmas." Mike sounded as cheerful as he could. He hadn't discussed it with El but he wanted to keep their relationship a secret until everyone came back and could just see them together. He wanted to see the looks on their faces.

"Okay, man. If you're sure. Have you talked to El?"

"Not yet. I'm afraid she'll hate me. I'm trying to get the courage to see her for Christmas." It sounded plausible when he said it out loud.

"Well good luck, buddy. We all hope it works out. Be honest with her, dude!"

"I will. Tell everyone I said hey, will you?"

"Sure thing. Merry Christmas, Mike. We'll see you soon. New Year's party will be awesome!"

"Right. Be safe coming back to school, Lucas. I'll talk to you soon. Bye." Mike hung up. That had gone relatively well.

When he got back to El's house she tried to get him to give away his secret about where he went and what he did that day but he just smiled and changed the subject every time she did. He'd ask Hopper something banal or ask her to tell him again her favorite actors, in order of how much she liked them. He was getting a kick out of it. She almost made him sleep on the sofa that night. Almost.

On Christmas Eve they had dinner together with Hopper. Mike had told him enough of his plan for the night that he knew the man would help him. Mostly he just needed to be reassured that after Hopper went to bed he'd stay in his room or at least only go to the bathroom and stay out of the living room area for the night. He felt like a tool asking the man to stay out of his own living room but he needed privacy and had alluded to what his plan was enough that he knew Hopper would not want to see any of it. He felt more confident going to bed that night.

He and El went to bed like they had the previous nights that week but he said he just wanted to snuggle with her. She snuggled but was worried the entire time that she had done something wrong. She fell asleep on his chest worrying still. Mike stayed awake, watching the clock and waiting.

At 12:08 he gently shook El awake.

"El? El, wake up. It's Christmas." He kissed her forehead as she awoke, her eyes still drowsy.

"What are we doing? Where are you going?" She asked as he got out of bed.

"You'll see. Come with me." He whispered. He took her hand and they tiptoed down the hall. Hopper had done as Mike had asked and had left the Christmas lights on. The room glowed with soft, subtle colors. He poked the logs that were still in the fire and they reignited, making the entire room immediately more cozy.

Hopper's stereo was against the wall and Mike popped in a tape that had been sitting in front of it the entire day. El had never noticed it there. Mike pulled El to the rug and they both sat down as the music started.

"I'm happy I get to spend Christmas with you." Mike started. "I hope I always do. I got you a present. I hope you like it." He took a small box out from behind some books on a shelf. He had hidden it there two days ago. El looked at him. He could see the reflection of the fire in her eyes. "You can open it."

She unwrapped the box. It was long and was clearly from a jewelry store. She opened it.

She looked down to see a silver colored necklace with a snowflake pendant. It was beautiful.

"Mike. You got this for me?" She held it up. The lights bounced off of it as it swung gently from her fingers.

"I thought you might like it. You know, the snow? It opens up."

She opened the locket. Inside was inscribed *Mike* on one side and *11* on the other.

"We go to eleven." Mike said in his best British accent. She tackled him and covered his face with kisses.

"I love you. I love you. I love you." She repeated as she kissed him, starting with pecks all over, each kiss getting slower and deeper until they were once again in the throes of passion. He gently pushed her down on her back, climbing over her. They helped each other undress and took their time making love in front of the fire. The music continued and just as Mike entered her, after her pleading and begging him to give himself to her, *The Promise* by When In Rome began. Mike felt like this was his destiny. This was easily their song and now he was making love to the woman he loved while it played. She noticed it too.

"The song! Did you make this tape?" She asked excitedly as their bodies met.

"I did. I love this song." He replied. Kissing her neck, her cheek, her mouth.

"I love you." She pulled him close, as close as she could get him and still allow him to continue his movements, which she was quite enjoying. It didn't take long for them both to reach what they had been working toward. She cried out his name just a few seconds before he slumped into her, trying to not be too loud when he exclaimed her own. They kissed for long after they had both recovered, wrapped in each other, whispering words of love to one

another.

"I didn't get you anything for Christmas." El suddenly looked sad,

"Yes you did. You are all I'd ever want." Mike kissed her. She searched his eyes, she could only see truth.

"Merry Christmas, Mike."

"Merry Christmas, El."

A/N: This chapter developed a mind of its own. But even when they're dirty they're so ridiculously sweet!

7. We've Only Just Begun

Max and Lucas threw a New Year's Eve party every year. This year would be no different, save that El and Mike were together and their friends had yet to know about it. They had discussed waiting to tell them in person, wanting to see the looks on their faces. El had the idea to make it dramatic. They decided they would arrive separately and avoid each other until the countdown began. If their friends asked them anything about having talked or worked things out they would shrug it off and try to change the subject.

Hopper would drop El off at Olympus around 11:00 the night of the party. Mike would show up half an hour later. He said he couldn't be there first because then he would keep watching the door for her and give them away. She agreed that he was probably right about that.

Mike had gone to his apartment the afternoon of New Year's Eve and wouldn't see El until that night. He had barely been away from her for the past two weeks and it was a weird feeling for him. *I miss her already? It's only been two hours. I'm such a wastoid.*

El was feeling the same. She went through her entire closet trying to find something she deemed good enough to wear that night. She wanted to look regular but also stunning, if that made sense. She wondered what Mike would wear. *Doesn't matter really. He could wear sweats and cowboy boots and I'd still want him.*

The hours ticked by agonizingly slowly but finally it was time for Hopper to take her to her friends' house. She had packed a small overnight bag because she would be staying with Mike after the party but only Mike, El, and Hopper knew that. She would tell her friends that she had brought it in case she decided to spend the night with Max and Lucas after the party ended.

"Ellie! You made it!" Max pulled her into a hug upon her arrival. "We can take your coat and bag upstairs so nothing gets spilled on them. How was your Christmas?" She asked as the girls deposited her things in Max and Lucas' apartment and made their way back down to the party.

"It was fine. Just hanging out at home mostly." *Mostly.*

"Ooh, cute necklace! Did Hopper give it to you?"

"Um, I got it for Christmas." El sidestepped the question. She had worn the necklace because she loved it and wanted to see what Mike thought when he realized she was wearing it.

She hugged everyone else as they spotted her. Dustin had checked out a portable PA system from school so they would have a microphone and sound for the countdown. Will had gotten a drafting table and a fancy camera for Christmas and had brought the camera. He was snapping candid photos of everyone. Lucas was the only hiccup. He pulled her aside to talk to her alone.

"Did Mike ever talk to you? He was going to try to at Christmas. I know he felt really bad."

El tried to think quickly. *How can I answer him and not totally lie to his face?*

"My dad said he stopped by but I was out shopping. I missed him." *Not a total lie. She had missed him when he was away.*

"Oh. Okay. Well I hope you two have a good time tonight and nothing is awkward. You're both my friends and I want to see you happy." Lucas said earnestly.

"Thanks, Lucas. I'm sure it will be fine."

Max grabbed El and they started dancing. El was having fun. Every once in a while she would twirl so that she would see the door and check to see if Mike had gotten there yet. He hadn't.

Lucas had set up a big digital clock at the top of the wall in the common room. It was easily visible from all areas of the first floor. It currently read 11:35. El was getting anxious since Mike hadn't gotten there yet. She tried her best to put on her actor face and play everything as cool as she could.

"Do you want to get a drink?" Max asked, out of breath from dancing around like a fool. They were having fun acting silly.

"Sure, but just something regular. I don't want to get drunk tonight."

"Big plans?" Max teased.

"No, just vivid memories of last time I was here and drinking. Ugh. The next day was terrible." Remembering the last time made her think of Mike again and she had to suppress a smile.

They walked into the kitchen. Max got a beer and El had a Coke. Just as she was turning around to leave the kitchen she ran into Mike, quite literally, who was coming to get a drink himself. She bumped into him and then looked up at him, not having expected to run into him in that way. Also not expecting her heart to beat out of her chest.

"Wheeler! You made it! How was home?" Max asked as she punched him on the shoulder. He was looking at El. Her eyebrow made a twitch, like a silent signal that he should look away, and he tore his eyes away from her and focused all of his attention on answering Max's question.

"Uh, I didn't stay long. I got into an argument with my dad and decided I'd rather spend Christmas alone than deal with his shit. I just hung out here." Mike thought he sounded believable enough. "Where are the guys?" Mike changed the subject.

"They're probably in Dustin's place. We're all meeting in the common room at five minutes to midnight for the countdown. You'd better be there." Max wagged her finger at him.

The girls remained in the kitchen as Mike left to go find Lucas, Dustin, and Will.

"Was that weird?" Max asked her.

"What? No. It's fine. We're all friends. We can get along."

"Did you ever talk to him about how you feel? You guys need to do that if you haven't. I think you'd feel much better after you did. Both of you." Max's face was a picture of warmth. It made El's heart swell knowing that her friend cared so much about her happiness. She also knew that Max knew how Mike felt and was trying to help him too. Max was a great friend.

"Maybe we will get to some time. I guess other things keep coming up." El suggested.

"Well I hope you two aren't sad at midnight. I think you should just grab him and kiss him. It's New Year's. No one would think anything of it."

"Maybe." El decided to let the conversation rest. She could see the clock from where they stood. It was 11:45.

Mike had found everyone in Dustin's apartment. Dustin wasted no time, asking him point blank if he was going to kiss El.

"I don't know if she'd want me to. I think I ruined everything." He tried to sound as sad as he could.

"It's New Year's." Will said. "New year, new you. Worst that can happen is she slaps you."

"Maybe." Mike shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's all go dance to one more song before I go get on the mic and do the countdown!" Dustin was already moving toward the common room. "We're saying goodbye to 1992!"

They all went out into the big room. Mike spotted El dancing to the song that was playing. She looked so beautiful tonight. She was wearing tight gray slacks that highlighted her toned legs and a light pink cashmere sweater that accentuated her body in the absolute best way. He had noticed that she was wearing the necklace he gave her. He couldn't wait until midnight. She spun around and their eyes met, her shooting him a soft smile from where she was. His heart melted.

He was still watching her when his thoughts were interrupted by the loud screech of the microphone being turned on and Dustin fiddling with the controls to try to get less feedback.

"Okay, okay, ladies and gentlemen, it's almost time! We have a minute until midnight, so find that special someone and get ready to ring in the new year!" People started looking around, finding the person they were going to kiss at midnight. Lucas was standing next to Max. Will had brought a date and was standing beside her. There

were shouts from other people, like a sort of Marco Polo game for New Year's parties. Everyone found who they were looking for. The clock said there were 20 seconds until midnight.

El was standing in the middle of the room. Somehow all of the couples had moved to the sides of the room and she was all alone, feeling on display. Everyone else seemed caught up in their own goings on though. Suddenly she saw a familiar head of hair moving from behind the people. He stopped about ten feet away from her. They locked eyes, both looking adoringly at the other. He began closing the space between them.

Dustin started the countdown as Mike stepped in front of El.

10...9...

Mike looked at her and smiled. Both of his hands went to the sides of her face, caressing her cheeks, his fingers settling into her hair.

8...7...

"I missed you today." Mike whispered.

"I missed you too." She was starting to move up onto her tiptoes.

6...5...

"You look beautiful. You always look beautiful." Mike was moving his face closer to hers now.

4...3...

"I love you so much." El said, the words only Mike could hear.

"And I love you. Forever." Mike leaned in.

2...1...*HAPPY NEW YEAR!*

Their lips met, heads tilting as they started kissing softly. El's arms went around his neck and he pulled her closer to him, his hands moving to her waist. They could hear *Auld Lang Syne* playing in the background. Mike bent his knees and picked her up so her head was

more aligned with his and she didn't have to crane her neck as much. She wrapped her legs around his waist to help support herself as their kiss deepened and they ignored the fact that anyone else was in the room. They could hear the horns and kazoos of the party goers as confetti fell around them. They were still kissing two minutes after midnight, El's hands on Mike's face, cradling his head like it was made of glass. His arms were under her legs still holding her up against him.

"Holy shit! Are you kidding me right now?" Max had finally noticed the spectacle that was Mike and El passionately kissing in the great room of their home. The friends circled the pair as Mike and El started to become aware that they were being watched. They shared two more quick but gentle kisses before El pulled back a little and rested her forehead on Mike's. They were grinning at each other.

"What is this?!" Max was tapping her foot. She was feigning anger but it was apparent that she was just as excited to see them kissing as everyone else was. Will and Dustin gave each other a high five. Mike set El back down on the floor. She turned to address their friends and felt him hug her from behind. He stayed like that while they explained everything to Max, Lucas, Will, and Dustin.

"Um, what can I say?" El genuinely wondered aloud.

Lucas teased them. "Do you *looove* him?" Everyone laughed.

El turned around to look at Mike. "I absolutely love him." She said, meant for the group but said to Mike.

"And I love her. More than anything." Mike answered them back, still looking at El.

"Je-sus, get a room! I'm going to get diabetes from how sweet you two are." Max chided, laughing.

The group sat around talking for an hour or so. Mike noticed that El was yawning a lot so he decided they should call it a night. El retrieved her bag and coat from upstairs and they said goodbye to their friends. Mike drove them back to his apartment.

While El brushed her teeth and got ready for bed, Mike played some gentle music on his stereo. He had gotten used to falling asleep listening to it and he hoped El wouldn't mind. He waited in his bed for her to get finished in the bathroom. It was really only a few minutes but Mike found himself getting antsy, excited to see her walk into his room.

Finally she appeared and crawled into bed next to him. She snuggled against him and yawned. He rubbed her back and soaked in the feeling of holding her in his own bed.

"This is nice." He said. "It's going to be weird when school starts again and I can't sleep with you every night." He sounded a little down.

"I wish I could sleep with you every night too."

Mike thought for a minute. The soft sounds of his music coupled with the feeling of her warm body next to him caused his mouth to work without officially consulting his brain.

"Maybe you could move in with me?" As soon as he'd said it, he kicked himself. "Damn, I'm an idiot. That's way too fast. I'm really not trying to scare you. I didn't think before I spoke."

"No, it's okay." El pondered for a moment. "Would you really want me to live with you?"

"Definitely." He turned to look at her, their faces just a few inches apart, lying on the pillows. "I would love to fall asleep next to you every night and wake up every morning with you. I'd love to know that where I called home is where you would be. But I wouldn't want to rush you or pressure you. I love you and I will wait as long as I have to wait." Mike kissed her lips and then put his head back on his own pillow.

"I'd love that too. I know this is fast and I can't help that. I only know how I feel and I feel like I need to be with you all the time. I need to know I'm waking up with you and coming home to you after my day is through. I want to cook dinner together. I want to fall asleep with my head on your chest." El smiled at the thought.

"What would your dad say though?" Mike worried.

"I'm not sure. I can't live with him forever. I'll graduate before too long and then he'll have to get used to me being gone whether I live with you or move away for a job. I can handle him. Are you formally asking me to move in with you?" El sat up. Mike followed suit.

"Eleven Hopper, (*this elicited a laugh from El*) would you please move in with me? I will rub your back and massage your feet and I'll make you laugh and I will make you feel loved. I promise." Mike took her hands in his.

"I will definitely move in with you. I promise to make you feel loved as well. My pretty, freckle faced, super smart, good at everything I want him to be good at, love of my life." She leaned forward and they kissed. It deepened quickly and they did what they would do almost every night for the foreseeable future, finally resting comfortably in one another's arms after they had demonstrated their love.

A/N: Sorry this was so short and so sappy. I didn't plan on it just being New Year's but the next chapter will see them back at school working on their movie/play project. But hey, Mileven! Word.

8. Movin' On Up

Definitely some smut in this chapter so if that's not your thang, you've been warned. Enjoy!

The following weeks were packed with some reshoots of scenes and regular classes. Mike and El were very busy. The entire production spent the weekends shooting on an apple farm. The characters of Miles and Flora had met working there and that is where their antagonizing banter with each other started. Flora's parents had kicked her out of their home and even though she irritated him, Miles had an extra room and said she could live with him until she found something better. That's how they developed their feelings. The filming was close to completion and all that would be left after that was editing and maybe some ADR.

El was excited to see it all come together. She was giddy when Will showed her the art for the poster he had been assigned to do, his mother seeing no other possible choice when it came to who she wanted to create the art for the film.

"Applesauce." El read aloud the word printed on the sheet. "She changed the name?"

"Apparently the name she originally had has already been used. She wanted something different. Since the apple farm plays a big role she thought this was good. It helped that I mentioned that it would look good on t-shirts and other merchandise." Will pointed at her finger guns style and winked.

"I'm so excited, Will. Not only for this, but I'm moving in with Mike!" El couldn't hold back her news any longer. She would have told Max first but she had been so busy since school had started back she hadn't had a chance. Every spare minute she had was spent with Mike.

"Wow! Really? Will we ever see either of you again?" Will kidded her.

She playfully slapped his arm. "I haven't talked to my dad about it yet though. I know he won't say no, I can do what I want. It's just that I

don't want him to be disappointed."

"It's not like you're moving to Europe with Mike. If it doesn't work out, your dad will always be there. You have to leave some time. Most kids our age haven't lived at home for a few years by now." Will reasoned with her, always the wise one.

"You're right." El was quiet for a minute. "I can't wait to live with him, Will. He makes me feel...I can't even describe it. Everything is better when I'm with him."

"I'm happy for you, El. Both of you." He smiled and turned back to the poster. "When this is finished your names will be on the credits at the bottom."

"Applesauce, starring El Hopper and Mike Wheeler!" El beamed.

"Is that what we're going with? Using that for a stage name? And should it be Mike or Michael?" Will asked.

El thought about it. "I'll have to ask Mike what he wants but I'm sticking with El. I barely remember to look up if someone calls me Jane."

When all of the scenes had been finished and El knew Hopper had a little more time, she finally approached him with her news of moving in with Mike. She had been pleasantly surprised when Hopper told her that he had seen it coming. He knew when they spent almost every night together either at Mike's place or at El's that it wouldn't be long before they took the next step. He had seen them together enough to know that they were smitten with each other.

"You don't mind?" El asked.

"I'll miss you being here but I'll still see you. I know you have to go your own way some time. I like Mike. And he loves you. If this is what you want those are my only requirements."

El hugged her dad. "Thank you, thank you, thank you! This makes me so happy!" She continued to hug him for a few seconds before asking, "do you think you could help me pack?"

Hopper groaned.

Since taking theater classes and being in the Fine Arts building a lot, El had seen several notices for auditions. They were for movies that were looking for people and scheduled to shoot in the summertime. She had been vacillating between wanting to go on one and thinking she needed more practice. One day she took one of the flyers that were on the bulletin board. She was sitting on the sofa looking at it when Mike got home. He had given her a key so she could come and go as she pleased. They planned for her to move in the following weekend when their friends were free. Not that she had a lot of stuff but they wanted to celebrate after they got her boxes all there and wanted everyone to be there with them.

"What's that?" Mike asked, tossing his keys on the coffee table.

"I picked it up at school." She passed it to him so he could see it. "I don't know. I mean, I want to try but I don't know if I'm ready." El sounded unsure of herself.

"I think you should do it. You're excellent, El. Don't get down on yourself. At least you could see what it's like and know for future auditions."

"What if it's far away?" She asked him.

"So? It says it will be filmed in the summer. You won't have school."

"But what if I miss you?" She looked down at her lap.

"I could come with you. If you want me to."

"You'd do that?" She looked up at him, her eyes hopeful.

"Obviously. I don't want to spend the summer away from you. I'd follow you anywhere."

She leaned forward and kissed him. "I can't wait to move in here next weekend."

"Neither can I." Mike said as he kissed her back.

Their friends helped her move in, each carrying boxes. It only took an hour and that was including them going back to El's to make sure they got all of her things. She only had to bring her clothes and personal items because she didn't need furniture. Mike already had everything.

El was feeling elated. Her friends were all with her and she would be able to wake up with Mike every morning so when Max suggested they turn on some music and break out the alcohol she had brought, El happily joined in.

"Take it easy this time, Ellie." Max snickered as she played bartender. "Don't ruin your first night living with your man." Max winked at her.

Everyone grabbed a drink, Mike and El having screwdrivers this time, and toasted El and Mike moving in together.

"To Mike and El living together!" Lucas raised his glass.

"To what can happen when you don't know what you're looking for in a bookstore!" Max added.

"To kismet!" Dustin proclaimed.

"To the last time we'll ever see Mike and El again!" Will teased.

They all clinked their glasses and drank. El finished hers like a champ, slamming her glass on the counter and causing Max to raise her eyebrow.

"Hit me!" El commanded the redhead.

Max looked to Mike, her eyes questioning if this was a good idea.

"One more and then she waits two hours." Mike conceded.

El wanted to dance. She pulled Mike into the living room, her drink in one hand and her other hand on his arm. She couldn't look away from him. He didn't mind. He twirled her around as best as he could. She knocked back the rest of her drink so she could set the glass down and put both of her arms around him. She was feeling tipsy and loose and at that moment had no cares in the world. He held her

close as they swayed to the music. He looked down at her and recognized the look in her eyes. Their friends were either talking or dancing, but they would definitely notice if Mike and El slipped away for a while.

El pulled herself to his ear. "I want you." She whispered. He could feel the hairs on his neck stand up.

He whispered back, "we can't right now, El."

She licked his earlobe. "Please? We can be really fast. Let's see how fast we can be. It will be fun." She smiled at him, her eyes shimmering with lust.

Mike looked around the room. Everyone was occupied. He kept dancing with El and slowly moved them toward the hallway. He checked the status of his friends again and they were all still involved in their own conversations. He stepped into the hallway with El, then took another step towards his bedroom. From there he could no longer see his friends. He looked down at El.

"You have to be the quietest you can possibly be and we have to be fast. Super fast. Do you understand?"

"Mike, I understand."

Max was trying to slide drinks down the countertop to Dustin and Lucas like she'd seen in the movies. She couldn't seem to manage to slide them hard enough to make it all the way to their destination.

"Shit. How do they do that?" Her jaw was set as she tried it one more time.

"Hey, guys? Where are Mike and El?" Will asked, looking around at the now empty living room. Everyone else had been in the kitchen area.

"One guess." Dustin snickered.

"Damn. He's going to get her pregnant." Lucas shook his head.

"Not true, Stalker. El is on the pill. Has been for years. I happen to

know she takes it at the same time every day. She is good to go!"

"Wanna sneak down the hall and see what they're up to?" Dustin questioned.

"Dustin! We can't do that!" Max exclaimed as she grabbed his arm and started pulling him down the hallway. "Oh, we're totally doing that." She put her finger to her lips to remind him to be quiet. They crept down the hall and put their ears to Mike's closed bedroom door. Dustin had to put his hand over his mouth to stifle his giggling. Max looked at Dustin, their eyes popping out as they heard Mike and El trying to be quiet.

Mike and El had no idea anyone was outside the door. She was trying her best to be quiet. She had been wearing a skirt so that helped in their effort to be quick. Mike had removed her underwear and she had unbuttoned his pants, only shedding what was necessary to get to the point. They had never had a quickie before, had always had the time to do whatever they wanted, and the urgency and possibility of being caught was making them both hotter for each other. She had her legs around his waist and he was holding her up, standing as she did most of the work. She had to bite his neck to keep from making noises she so desperately wanted to make but she thought she was doing a good job holding them back. Mike turned and put her back against his door so he could get more leverage. She was bouncing up and down on him and he knew he wouldn't last long.

Dustin and Max heard the thud of El's back hitting the door. They both had to keep themselves from laughing hysterically. The idea that their friends were having stand-up sex two inches away from them just seemed too funny to them both. They heard Mike's muffled voice.

"El, I'm close." Even through the closed door and with him trying to be quiet, they heard him. Of course, they were trying to.

Max almost choked when she heard El's reply.

"You're making me come right now. Let's come together." Max knew El was trying to say it quietly but she could still hear her, the impending climax causing her to gasp her request louder than she

had wanted. Max was not used to hearing El be so descriptive. They heard another bang on the door and then could tell that Mike and El had moved away. The tension on the doorframe released.

"Let's go." Max mouthed to Dustin. They tiptoed back to the kitchen.

"Well?" Lucas asked when they returned. He and Will were sitting at the counter.

"That was intense." Max said.

"Mental." Dustin agreed.

A little while later Mike appeared in the kitchen. He was acting as though he hadn't been gone for the last ten minutes.

"Where were you?" Will asked, knowing full well where Mike had been. It was all he could do to not laugh when he asked.

"Um, bathroom." Mike answered, making himself another drink.

"Where's El?" Max inquired, her eyes gleaming with snark.

"She's putting some stuff in the closet?" Mike said, not good at lying on the spot.

"Ha!" Max laughed. They all took their drinks to the living room to sit. El came down the hallway a couple of minutes later. Her hair was only the tiniest bit disheveled. She smiled at Mike before she took her seat next to him.

After their friends left for the night, they got ready for bed.

"You were very good at being quiet today, El." Mike said as he snuggled into her after she got into bed.

"Thanks. Do I have to be quiet now?" She asked, rolling her leg over his midsection.

"I won't let you." Mike replied, pulling her down and making up for all the noise they hadn't been able to make that afternoon.

El did go on a couple of auditions the same month that she moved in with Mike. She wasn't exactly expecting that she would get a callback. She was nervous. Mike tried his best to encourage her and build her confidence but she still had a nagging feeling in the back of her mind that she wouldn't be good enough. She had been in the cutting room several times getting Dustin to show her how he did that, wanting to learn as much as she could about the process. Their movie was almost completely finished and they were planning to screen it in about a month after the posters arrived and they had done some advertising around the campus and town.

A week after she auditioned she got a phone call. They wanted her for the part in a science fiction movie but it wasn't just any part. It was the lead. El didn't know what to think. Her mind was a blur as she wrote all the information down on a notepad. They would send her a formal letter with an itinerary and location of the set and when to be there but offered her some quick information when they initially called her. She had been home alone when they called and now she was pacing around the apartment, adrenaline coursing through her, making her unable to be still. Finally she heard the sound of a key in the door and Mike walked in. She threw herself into his arms. He thought she was upset because he could feel her shaking.

"What's wrong? I've got you." He said as he held her.

"Nothing's wrong. I'm so happy. Mike, I got a part! I got *the* part!" She kissed him and he could feel her smile against his mouth.

"What? That's awesome! I'm so proud of you! Tell me all about it." They moved to the sofa and El proceeded to tell him everything she knew. She didn't know the title yet, they were keeping it classified for security reasons. It would be filmed in California and she would be gone for about two months.

"I'm going to miss you though." El looked sad all of a sudden.

"Not if I come with you." He smiled. "I mean, I don't want to hold you back or tie you down but I know I want to be there with you if you'll let me."

She pounced on him then. The combination of adrenaline and love caused a fire to ignite and he almost toppled into the floor when he caught her.

"Take me to bed." She instructed him. He obliged.

He threw her onto the bed, knowing that she liked his more dominant side, and crawled to her on his knees. They ripped at each other's clothing until there was nothing left on either of them. She kissed him needily, her lips tracing from his neck to his chest. He watched as she trailed lower. He was standing on his knees on the bed. She kept going lower. When she reached his erect member she looked up at him, her eyes watching his as her tongue teased the tip, causing him to twitch. She kissed him all the way down his length until she got to the base and then she pulled his foreskin down with one hand and took him into her mouth, holding the skin taught. Mike almost came unglued right then. The sensation of her mouth on his hard dick was breathtaking, especially since her holding the skin down was making him extra sensitive. She would take him all the way in and then slowly suck as she came back up the shaft, her tongue working as she did so. El had to breathe carefully and keep her gag reflex under control but she was so far making it work. She would tease him by putting her mouth around him but not letting her lips touch him, making him want to push her down.

"Oh, my god, El. You look so good doing that." Mike whispered as he looked down at her. He didn't have to whisper but felt that it made everything more intimate. She looked up at him with her big eyes. He could see the tip of himself poking her cheek from inside her mouth. It was one of the hottest sights he had ever seen.

She pulled her mouth off of him and used her hand, lazily though, as if she wasn't trying to finish him just yet.

"I'm not going to need very long tonight, Mike. I'm so wet already. It's only going to take a few strokes, I can tell." She whispered to him as she stroked him, looking up at him. He noticed she had moved her hand to between her legs.

"I want to do it." Mike said. He was watching her play with herself.

"Do you? You're better at it. Maybe I should let you. Though I'd rather have something else." El teased.

That was all Mike could take. He pulled her up to him, his tongue invading her mouth. She accepted with the same force. From where they had been on the bed, when they collided it sent Mike backwards so that his back was now against the headboard. El wasted no time mounting him, keeping her upper body as close to his as she could. She felt him glide into her, her smooth walls welcoming him. It was her favorite position, if she had to pick one. She could control how much pressure she needed and knew exactly how to move herself to get to where she wanted to go. She also liked the idea of thinking about how hot it would look if she was watching it. She liked Mike's hands on her and being so close that she could smell his aftershave. She liked being able to have him inside her and still be able to lean forward only slightly to kiss him all she wanted.

She had been right in her estimation of how long it would take her to climax. In just a couple of minutes she felt herself tighten and could feel the beginnings of her orgasm.

"Mike, I'm..."

"I know, I can tell. I'm gonna come too. Is that okay? Can I come too? You look so sexy riding me like that and I don't think I can hold back." Mike kissed her softly.

"You're so hot when you talk to me like that. I like it when you tell me what you're doing to me." El said as she nibbled his ear.

"You mean when I tell you how hot you are when you're taking my cock inside you? Moving all around so it makes you come? You like it when I tell you that you make me want to fuck you so hard you can't walk the next day because I want you so badly?"

"Yes! I like it when you tell me...oh, Mike! Your cock is making me come. I'm coming on you!" She pushed herself down on him as far as she could. Mike felt himself spill into her as she cried out and pulled her into his chest so he could hear her breathing and stroke her hair as they calmed down.

Afterwards as they were lying in bed snuggling, both about to fall asleep, Mike thought aloud.

"I never want to tie you down, El. If you find something better than me I want you to take it. You deserve the best. If this movie thing makes you a huge star I don't want to hold you back."

She hugged him tightly. "Don't talk that way. You are not a weight tying me down. You are my anchor. I'll always need you. I love you."

She kissed his cheek and fell asleep on his chest.

**A/N: Thanks for reading! One chapter left and then an epilogue.
Sorry I can't keep them off of each other...**

9. California Dreaming

El was shocked at the number of people who attended the premiere of the movie. It seemed like the whole campus was there. The previous few weeks leading up to it had been a blur of dress fittings and school and *Mike*. She had received the information about her upcoming Hollywood film and they would be leaving for it literally a day after school ended. All they could see was their future.

The night of the premiere, El and Mike were escorted via limousine to the theater where the screening would take place. They both were surprised when they pulled up to a large crowd of people standing behind velvet ropes and were let out of the car onto a red carpet. El's dress was a muted crimson color that was strapless. The bodice was form fitting and the skirt flowed outward from her body. It shimmered in the lights. Mike could barely look away from her for a second. He was wearing a black tuxedo and she thought he looked ravishing. People were actually asking for their autographs. They laughed as they were moved inside by security. El couldn't believe how official the school was making their little production.

The credits rolled she felt Mike squeeze her hand when he saw their names. He had been holding it throughout the entire picture. El looked at him and her smile was radiant as she squeezed his hand in return. She couldn't believe all this had happened to her in just a few months.

Later that night, after the premiere was over, Hopper had everyone over to his house to celebrate, Mike and El, Joyce and Will, Lucas, Max, and Dustin. They all wanted to know more about El's new summer project.

"What is it called?" Max asked.

"I don't know yet. They have a working title that is a decoy. I guess I'll find out when we get there."

"Are you too excited?" Will asked. His mom and Hopper had gone into the kitchen to talk and leave the kids alone.

"I am. I can't believe this is happening. And Mike is going with me. It's just *perfect*." El smiled contentedly.

"What are you going to do about your apartment here, Mike?" Lucas wondered.

"I'll keep it. My dad pays for it so I'll just let him keep doing that until school starts back. I only have one more year anyway."

"Have you talked to him about that, Mike? You know how he gets." Dustin interjected.

Mike thought about it. He hadn't talked to his father about his leaving the apartment for the better part of the summer to follow his girlfriend to California. As far as he knew his father didn't even know El was living with him. He hadn't actually spoken to him since Christmastime.

"Yeah, I guess I need to tell him. Do the *mature* thing and be a man about it. We're supposed to leave in three weeks. I'll wait as late as I can. Maybe my mom will help me if he gets mad." Mike was hopeful.

El had changed out of her fancy dress at her dad's house but Mike was still in the majority of his tuxedo, having removed his tie and jacket, but he wanted to go home and change so the friends all hugged each other and congratulated Mike and El on a terrific movie premiere and the two went back to their place for the night. The excitement of the day had made them more tired than they had thought so when they got home they didn't even feel like their regular activities, choosing instead to just kiss each other goodnight and fall asleep as soon as their heads hit their pillows.

As the time drew near to when they would leave for California, Mike knew he had to speak to his father about the apartment situation. He thought it would be best to do it in person, as much as he hated to drive home and do it. So the weekend before he and El were to leave he went home. El had wanted to go with him but she had to study for a final and knew she would be too distracted. He hadn't been away from her in a long time, and he hadn't slept without her in months so he felt like his chest was caving in as he drove away, leaving her behind at the apartment. He wanted to be as quick with his trip as he

could be.

When he got home he cut right to the chase with his father. Ted Wheeler was surprised to see him walk through the door, as Mike had not mentioned to anyone that he would be coming home that weekend.

"Hey, Dad. I need to talk to you. I need to tell you something." Mike started, he hadn't even brought in his overnight bag.

Ted Wheeler assumed that Mike would tell him that he had gotten bad grades. Ted was always assuming the worst about him even though Mike had never given him a reason to do so.

"What is it now, son? How have you wasted my money this time?"

Mike took a deep breath, trying to calm his seething nerves. He knew that starting an argument would not be in his favor.

"I wanted to talk to you about the apartment. I'm actually leaving for California at the end of the week and I'll be gone for the better part of two months. It might be a bit longer. I'm not sure how it all works just yet." Mike began.

"How what all works? And are you expecting me to pay for something you aren't even using?" Ted rolled his eyes.

"My girlfriend got a part, it's the lead role actually, in a Hollywood movie and I'm going out there with her while she films it. I don't want her to be alone."

"If she's old enough to go out there then she's old enough to be alone." Ted wasn't even listening to Mike.

"You don't get it, Dad. I'm going whether you like it or not. I'd like to keep the apartment but if you don't want to keep paying for it you don't have to. I just wanted to talk to you about it man to man."

"I'll either pay for your last year of school, which I'm not happy about by the way, or I'll pay for that and your apartment as long as you'll be living there in it all summer. This girl isn't distracting you from your studies is she?"

"No, Dad. If anything, she is the reason I try harder."

"Girlfriends come and go, Mike. Don't let her bring you down. I don't think you should go out there with her. She'll meet someone else and you can focus on your own life."

"She *is* my life! And if I go with her I'll meet people who work in the field *I* want to work in. I could meet directors and producers, Dad. I could get my foot in the door." Mike was starting to feel his blood pressure rising for the first time in his life.

"You say that now but how can you be sure? You're only 21 years old, Mike. You don't know anything." His father had dismissed his feelings for the last time.

"No. I love her. I love her now and I'll love her when I'm 40 and I'll still love her when I'm 80. She is *it*, Dad. She is all I'll ever want or need. Keep your money. I will figure out my life. El and I will figure it out together. I'd rather be with her and be happy than have money and be miserable. I'm sorry I even thought I could have a real conversation with you that might end up with some sort of agreement. I will get my things out of the apartment and you can stop paying for it. I'm going back home now. Looks like I have things to pack."

Mike didn't let his father speak again. He was out the door almost immediately without a glance back. He needed to see El so he raced back to her as fast as was legally possible. It was late when he got home and El was in bed already. He quietly kicked off his shoes and jeans and crawled into bed, wrapping her sleeping form in his arms and breathing her in, feeling himself relax for the first time in hours. She stirred when she felt him behind her.

"Mike?" She sleepily turned her head to look at him.

"Shhh, go back to sleep. I'm home. I couldn't stay there. I wanted you." He kissed her cheek and they both fell asleep.

The next morning she got to find out all about his conversation with his father. She had said she just wouldn't take the part after all so that there wouldn't be tension between Mike and his dad. He was not

having any of that.

"This is your life, El. You are going. I will be right behind you. I just have to find some place to put all of our furniture. It may take me a few days. But you are definitely taking this part. It's what you want to *be*, it's your career. You will not throw it away because of my father. That will not happen."

"What if you can't find anywhere to put it?" She sounded sad and worried. Everything had been going so well. She should have known the other shoe would drop.

"Then I'll leave it and call it a loss. It's just things. It's not *you*. You are way more important than furniture. I can always get more furniture." Mike kissed her gently. She knew he was right but she didn't want to set off on this journey alone.

"Do you promise you'll be right behind me?" She asked.

"I promise."

Mike drove El to the airport the day they had been supposed to leave together. He hated that he couldn't go and even though she tried to hold back her tears as he said goodbye he could see them in her eyes.

"It won't be long. I will see you soon, okay? I'll get this all taken care of and then I'm on my way to you. I have the address where you'll be. I will be there. Just call me when you get there."

He kissed her, gently and deeply, hoping the feeling would last her until he was with her again. He watched her board the plane and waited until it departed before he drove back towards campus. He didn't go to his apartment though. He went to El's house. He had to talk to her father.

Hopper was surprised to see Mike at his door. He knew there had been some issues with him leaving with El but he wasn't expecting him to show up so close to her departure time. He let the boy inside. Mike looked like he might cry at any minute. They sat in the living room as Mike told him all about the conversation with his father, leaving nothing out. Hopper had an angry expression on his face as

Mike told him what his father had said about El being a distraction and how she was bringing him down. Hopper knew the truth about Mike and El. They made each other better.

"So I have my furniture I have to store or get rid of and I only have a week before I'll be kicked out because rent will be due and he's not paying it anymore. I need to get to El as quickly as I can. I told her if I couldn't find somewhere to put it all I'd just leave it but I know that's not a practical idea. I might need that furniture for years. Who knows if I'll get a decent job when I'm finished with school?" Mike ran his hand through his hair nervously.

"That's your father talking, Mike. Don't sell yourself short. Why don't you bring everything you can over here? Get your friends to help you. Hell, *I'll* come help you. I have that shed in the back and it has room if we stack things. You might not be able to keep every lamp and small thing, but I can keep your bed and your mattress and couch. I'll put your television in my bedroom. I always did mean to get a tv for in there." Hopper smiled. He wanted to help Mike because he knew El loved him so much.

Mike looked at the man, relief washing over his face almost immediately.

"You'd do that for me?" Mike couldn't believe he was being so generous.

"Kid, my daughter loves you. She really does. If you ever need something you can always ask me." Hopper put his arm around Mike as they sat on Hopper's sofa. Mike couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten a fatherly hug. He cried.

Mike was in bed already when the phone rang. El had made it to the condo they were putting her up in for the extent of filming. Her voice sounded like angels singing. They talked for two hours.

"I miss you." El said.

"I miss you too. I'll see you soon. I love you." Mike said as they ended their call. He sighed and rolled over, feeling where she should be.

Max and Lucas had the sofa, bed frame, and mattress in the back of a truck that Lucas had borrowed. Dustin was bringing the electronics and anything from the kitchen that would fit in his car, like the microwave and Mike's toaster. Mike had all of his clothes, the clothes he would take to California packed in two suitcases.

They pulled into Hopper's driveway and were met by Will Byers and El's dad. Joyce had come over when Jim told her what was going on and was busy cooking so they could all eat together one last time before Mike left. His father had cancelled the credit card he'd given Mike for emergencies so Mike was going to have to use his own card to fund his plane ticket out there but he was just glad to be getting to go at all. The friends made quick work of getting his things moved around to the shed in the back. It took up less space than they had anticipated and Mike got to keep a few items that he had figured he'd have to part with, like his coffee maker and his bedroom lamp.

Before they ate, Jim pulled Mike aside.

"Here, I want you to have this." He handed Mike \$500.

"What? I can't take this!"

"You can and you *will*. It's to pay for your plane ticket. I talked to her last night and she misses you so much I'm afraid it's going to affect her performance. Take it and buy your ticket. Go tomorrow. Call me from the airport and let me know what time you should arrive and I'll call her and throw her off track so you can surprise her. Maybe it's the theater in me but I like some drama." Hopper smiled. "Just take it, kid. Get to her as fast as you can." Mike didn't know what to do other than hug the man.

He felt light as he ate dinner with his friends, like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He had called and reserved a plane ticket at Hopper's and would pay for it the next day at the airport. He needed to know that he'd have a seat on the plane. He would be arriving at 6:35 p.m. PST if there were no delays. He told Jim he would still call him and keep him informed.

He spent the night that night at Olympus with his friends. They were reminiscing about the school year and how many things had changed

for Mike throughout it.

"When did you know that you were in love with her, Mike?" Max wanted to know. She had her own ideas but she wanted to know what he thought.

"I think I knew the night of the party when you guys named this place. When she got sick and I came down to ask you if I could put her in your bed, remember? Right before that she was sitting on the floor of the bathroom and when she looked at me and said she didn't feel good I felt like all I wanted to do the rest of my life was make sure she felt good. I know, it's sappy. But it's true."

"Awww, you're such a romantic dork!" Max laughed. "I'm kidding. That may be the sweetest thing I've ever heard."

"I'm gonna miss hanging with you guys this summer. But I'm so excited to watch El do her thing. I'll call as often as I can." They all toasted to Mike and El and the upcoming summer, toasted to promises kept.

The next day Lucas dropped Mike off at the airport. He was feeling worried until he had his boarding pass in his hand because he didn't have full trust in over-the-phone reservations. He felt much better when the pass was in his hand and he found his gate. He called Hopper to let him know that so far everything was on schedule. He and Hopper both had calculated how long it might take to get from the airport to her condo by taxi and had factored in the extra time. Hopper would call her an hour or so before Mike would show up. The plan (*Hopper's idea*) was to tell her that he hadn't talked to Mike, knowing that she wouldn't have talked to him either, and let her worry a little about where he might be. She of course would assume that when he was coming he would let her know so she could meet him at the airport so she would not be expecting him to show up at her place. Mike thought Hopper was a bit devious but he had to admit he wanted to see the look on her face when she opened her door and he was there.

Mike's leg would not stop bouncing up and down for almost the entire flight. He knew he was annoying the woman sitting next to him but he couldn't help it. Finally they touched down and he

deboarded the plane. Somehow both of his suitcases had made it there as well. Mike found a phone and called Jim Hopper.

"Hey, I'm in California! I just got my bags and I'm about to go hail a taxi. If traffic isn't too bad I think I can be at her place within the hour. Are you ready to do your thing?" Mike asked.

"Son, it was my idea. I was born ready. Be safe and take care of her."

"I will. Oh, and Hop? Thanks." They ended their call and Mike went to hail a cab.

El was feeling off, she hadn't talked to Mike today and he always called around the same time. She had called his place but there hadn't been an answer. She thought it was odd that his machine didn't pick up either. It just rang and rang until finally she gave up. When her phone rang she breathed a sigh of relief. *Finally. He's calling.*

"Hello?"

"Hey, Eleven, how's my girl?" It was her dad. She felt a wave of disappointment that it wasn't Mike.

"Hey, Dad. How are you? It's nice to hear your voice."

"I'm good, everything is good. How are things going there?" He went on.

"Things are fine. I met my co-stars and they're nice. I got the script. I can't tell you anything about it but I think you'll like this movie when it's all finished. I don't even have to kiss anyone! It's more of an action role. Hey, Dad, have you talked to Mike recently?"

"Not for a few days. Why? Doesn't he call you every night?" Jim prodded.

"He does but I haven't heard from him. I didn't hear from his last night either. It's weird. I don't know if I should worry or what."

"Try not to worry about it. I'm sure he'll call later tonight. He might just be busy. You know how it goes." Jim thought he might be

enjoying this a little too much. "Look, I'm sure he's fine. Just get some rest and I'm sure you'll talk to him soon. I love you, kid. I have to get my food out of the oven. I'll talk to you in a few days."

"Okay, I love you too. Bye, Dad." El hung up the phone.

A short time later she heard a knock on her door. Thinking someone had the wrong address she went to let them know that. She only opened the door a little, leaving the door guard latched. She peeked through the opening ready to tell the person they had the wrong place.

There was Mike. *Her Mike.*

She slammed the door so she could throw back the door guard and then ripped the door back open, pulling him in with all the force her little body could muster.

"Mike! Oh, Mike! I missed you so much!" She was kissing him all over his face.

"I missed you too. God, I missed you." They stopped long enough to get his bags and then she locked the door back. She crossed to him and let him envelop her in his arms, feeling like she could never get close enough to him.

"I love you." Mike whispered as he held her close.

"Show me."

They were kissing and undressing each other as they made their way to the bedroom, clothes strewn the entire way. Unlike sometimes, their kisses were passionately tender, like both of them were trying to make up for missing each other the past few days.

"I needed you so badly." El whispered into his ear, nibbling on his earlobe the way she knew he liked.

"Yeah? I needed you too. I needed to feel you." Mike responded, his hands exploring her body and causing her to moan softly. She felt him on her leg and didn't wait any longer. She moved herself with precision and he was inside her with ease.

"Oh, fuck. I almost forgot how good this feels." She whimpered as she felt him slide all the way inside her. She was on top again and they were both sitting up, her legs wrapped around him. He was controlling how hard she bounced on him and he wouldn't let her have her way totally, grinning at her frustration. She kissed him harder, like that would make him yield.

"Please, Mike! I need to have you deeper." She begged.

"Are you sure? It's been a few days. I wouldn't want to hurt you." He was teasing her now.

She called his bluff and when she bounced up again she used her legs to give her more momentum and she pulled herself off of him entirely. She smirked at him, thwarting his teasing.

"You don't give me what I want then I don't give you what you want." She said, her eyes shimmering with desire.

Mike hadn't expected her to hold out when she was so clearly turned on. He pulled her closer to him, neglecting his throbbing member for a minute, and kissed her deeply, trying to convey his apology for frustrating her.

"I'm sorry." He breathed as he continued kissing her. "I won't do it again." El cut him off with a steamy kiss.

"Don't say *promise*. Sometimes I like it when you do that. Just not today. I need to feel you too much."

Mike nodded and pushed her back down, she let him and in seconds she was mounted again, her legs and arms wrapped around him as they sat in the middle of the bed. This time he let her take what she wanted. It only took a few minutes of him moving her up and letting her fall back down before she pulled back from him enough to look him in the eyes. He knew that look.

"Mike. Oh, Mike!" She could barely form any other words. Every other sound she made was a moan or a gurgle.

"Do it, El, I will too. I missed you so much." He watched her brow crease and he dropped her hard, pushing her down further as he

bottomed out inside her. They came together. He pulled her close and they held each other afterwards.

"I'm glad you're finally here." El said as she rested on top of him, her head on his chest listening to his heart beat. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"You know you can."

"It doesn't matter what your father does or doesn't pay for anymore. You won't believe what I'm getting paid for this movie. We will never need your father's money for anything." She lifted her head and looked at him. She smiled when she saw his astonishment.

"I love you so much, El. I don't know where or what I'd be if I hadn't met you in the bookstore that day, if you hadn't changed your major, if I hadn't taken the part. Everything just lined up like it was destiny. You are my destiny." She kissed him, long and deep, and then they both fell asleep, dreaming of their future together.

A/N: Okay, sorry they can't keep their hands off each other. It's their thing. Just the epilogue to go. I know this story kind of petered out and I'm sorry. Hopefully my future ones will be better. Thanks as always for reading!

10. The Promise (Epilogue)

Mike had always wanted to direct but when El's career really started to take off he began writing. He soon found himself becoming a bit of a script doctor in Hollywood. He had a knack for storytelling and while he was working on his own ideas he made money editing other people's work. He didn't need the money, El made plenty, but he liked the creative outlet it offered. After they finished college they had moved to Los Angeles to be closer to audition locations. For the last three years they had been living together in California, El happily working, getting parts in almost everything she auditioned for and being nominated for some minor awards. He was so proud of her.

And despite El always working and being recognized in public and having actual fans, Mike still felt like he came first in her life. He never felt jealous of her co-stars or of fans taking her time because she always *made* time for him.

They were at a dinner party that one of the producers of her current movie was hosting. Mike was having a casual conversation with the director when he happened to glance up and his eyes met El's from across the room. It was like seeing her for the first time. His palms suddenly felt sweaty and his mouth was dry and he could hear the director still speaking to him but he could only focus on El.

I want to marry her.

Her face changed from the smile she was giving him and became concerned. She crossed the room to him.

"Are you okay? You have a strange look on your face." Her hand on his arm, squeezing gently. He could feel his heart beating in his chest.

"I'm fine. I just saw you there and got distracted. You took my breath away. You're just so *pretty*." He smiled and leaned in to kiss her cheek, thinking he would refrain from smearing her lipstick at the party.

"Do you want to get out of here? I don't think they would mind. Dinner is over and people are just talking." El asked, whispering in

his ear.

"Definitely."

Their lovemaking that night was intense. Only Mike knew why.

The very next day he bought a ring. He knew her tastes, it was perfect. He went with a platinum band that had a classic round stone that was flanked by a pear shaped sapphire on either side. He had been saving most of his money from script writing and had close to \$9500 to spend. He was surprised that his choice in rings took the majority of his savings but El was worth it and he thought she would really like the ring. He just had to think of a way to ask her.

The idea came to him a few weeks later while he was making breakfast for the both of them. El had an audition later in the day and was very nervous and excited because it was for a film she really wanted to do. She had always had a bit of a soft spot for good horror movies and that is what the script promised, and with a prominent director as well. She wanted to experience doing a well done horror film while she was young and the prospect of working with Wes Craven was compelling.

Mike could tell that she was nervous. He felt nervous for her. She stared blankly across the table as she munched on her Eggo waffles.

"You'll do great. Try not to worry so much about it. And if you don't get it, it's okay. You'll get something else. You are great at what you do. If they don't choose you then they just had something else in mind for the role all along. It won't be because of you." Mike tried to comfort her, reaching across the table and taking her left hand. She laced her fingers in his and smiled.

"I love you."

"I know." His response triggered her laugh. That was his intention.

Once El had left for her audition, Mike started writing. He wanted to be finished with it by the time she got home and he wanted it to be as close to perfect as he could make it. The words came easily, as though it was a vivid memory he was committing to paper, as though

it was a childhood bedtime story that he knew by heart. Satisfied with the pages he'd written, Mike waited for El to return. He hoped they would be celebrating her getting the role she was wanting but he would have to wait and see. He wasn't sure when he would show her what he'd written. He thought when the time was right he would know.

He knew she was unhappy when he heard the door slam. Mike entered the living room of their apartment to find El sitting on the sofa, her face in her hands.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He asked, sitting next to her.

"No." A pause. "The car service took an alternate route and I was late to the audition. All of the other girls there were taller than me by four or five inches. I read with a guy whom I had absolutely no chemistry with. I know I didn't get it. It was a disaster."

Mike pulled her into him. "It's okay. Maybe it wasn't what you'd want anyway."

She pulled away. "You don't have to try to make me feel better. I'm going to fail a lot." She was short with him, he could see tears in her eyes.

Mike looked hurt but then his face softened. "Should I sing to you? *When your day is through, and so is your temper, you know what to do...I'm gonna always be there.*" The song always made her smile and this case was no different.

Tears breaking free and trickling down her face, she sang the next line, "*sometimes if I shout, it's not what's intended, these words just come out with no gripe to bear.*" She leaned back into him. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I'm just disappointed. I think I had already given myself the part in my head and then I let myself down. How was *your day?*"

Mike hugged her from the side. *Is now the time? I think now is the time.*

"I was just working on an idea. I wrote a scene and I'm hoping it turns into my best work ever." Playing it off as nothing big, he knew

he'd pique her interest.

"What is it? Can I read it?"

Like clockwork.

"We could read it together. There are two parts. Do you want to?" Mike asked, already standing.

"Yes. I love to read what you write."

Mike's heart was racing as he went down the hall to get the short script he'd written that day. While he was in their little office where he did most of his writing, he opened his bottom desk drawer and rifled through it. Hidden under some papers and Dungeons & Dragons books, next to a twenty sided die, he found the small box he had stashed there only weeks earlier. He put it in his pocket and walked back down the hall to where El was waiting.

"It's just a part of a bigger thing. I want to see how it tests. See if you like it. The character I read will have most of the lines. You can follow along." Mike handed her some pages. "Don't get too far ahead though. Stay with me." He smiled.

"You have the first line." Mike gestured to the pages in her hand.

El looked down. "Oh, okay. Starting now." She read the word. "*Promise?*"

"It means something that you can't break, ever. It's like an oath, like forever. If I give you a promise I will always keep it."

"*Why do you bring it up now?*"

"I've been thinking about it a lot. It's kind of all I think about. You, and me. Us. I want more."

"*More?*"

"I want everything. I want your laughter, I want to dry your tears. I want to have fun with you and I want to take care of you when you're sick. I want to be by your side no matter what happens."

"What are you saying?"

El was looking at the paper, reading along as Mike recited his lines, realization dawning gradually on her face.

"When I first saw you I thought you were special. Something drew me to you. When I first spoke to you I felt like I'd known you for always. When I first touched you it felt like home. You gave me focus and drive, you made me better than I was. When you're gone I feel empty. You make me feel warm when I'm cold and you make me feel found when I'm lost. You are everything I'll ever need."

El slowly looked up, having read to the end of the page. The words just stopped. Raising her head she met Mike's eyes. He was on his knee, holding a small box.

"El, I love you so much. I want to always be with you. I want you to fall asleep on my chest after watching tv, I want you to finish the last of the juice and put the empty carton back in the fridge, I want you to use my razor to shave your legs and make it all dull. I want everything that comes with you being you. Forever. Will you marry me?" He opened the box, holding it out to her.

El's hand went to her mouth. Tears were already spilling from her eyes. With a shaky hand she reached out to Mike, nodding. Their hands met and he pulled her to him, still on his knees on the floor.

"Yes," she managed to whisper. "I love you too. I love you forever." She kissed him hungrily, smiling a few seconds later. He pulled back slightly after a minute.

"Do you want this?" He asked, taking the ring out of the box.

"I definitely want that. Did you pick this out?" She asked as he slipped the ring onto her finger.

"I did. I hope you like it."

"It's perfect. I love it. I love *you*. Always." She rested her head on his shoulder.

They were both so happy. They knew they would always take care of

one another. They didn't have to worry about fame or money coming between them because what they had was not an ordinary love. Mike picked her up and started down the hall toward the bedroom. He pushed play on the stereo before he set her down on the bed. The familiar chords from their song began.

"You're my best friend. I will always be here for you." Kissing between his words, Mike continued, "you can always tell me anything and I'll always tell you everything. I will do anything for you." The time for words ended and they let their bodies finish the conversation, both knowing that showing each other was much better than telling. Mike kept his promises. El knew that. She kept hers too.

I promise you, I promise you I will...

A/N: Everyone go brush your teeth so you don't get cavities. I know that was short and super sappy. Thanks for reviewing and reading. Much love to all.